



Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity

JB Pritzker, Governor

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PRITZKER ADMINISTRATION AWARDS \$200,000 IN BROADBAND READY GRANTS TO STRENGTHEN REGIONAL BROADBAND ENGAGEMENT, ANNOUNCES \$250,000 IN NEW FUNDING

READY grants expanding 21st century digital access in four major regions – East Central, Northern Stateline, Southeastern, and Southern Illinois – and providing opportunity for six additional regions

SPRINGFIELD – Governor JB Pritzker and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) today announced the first cohort of grant recipients as part of the Office of Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption + Digital Equity (READY) program. Through this first of its kind program, \$200,000 has been awarded to four regional entities to accelerate progress toward eliminating the digital divide.

The inaugural READY cohort is fueling local efforts in four major regions throughout Illinois, including East Central, Northern Stateline, Southeastern, and Southern Illinois. The program is one of an increasing robust *Digital Equity Package* offered by the Illinois Office of Broadband to increase access, adoption and utilization of high-speed internet access – all through the lens of digital equity and inclusion. To further these efforts across all ten economic development regions of the state, the Office of Broadband is launching the next READY notice of funding opportunity (NOFO) today, with another \$250,000 available for grants.

“High-speed internet is an essential resource for Illinois communities to succeed in the 21st century economy and this administration is laser-focused on expanding access across the state,” **said Governor Pritzker**. “With more than 1 million households currently without reliable internet – the state is dedicating \$420 million to enhance our broadband infrastructure. The READY grant program will help put the power of planning directly into the hands of our communities and complements our historic efforts to bring enhanced speed and access to every community in Illinois.”

The initial cohort of READY grantees includes awards of \$50,000 for the following entities:

- Eastern Illinois University on behalf of the Southeastern Region
- Region 1 Planning Council on behalf of the Northern Stateline Region
- Southern Illinois University on behalf of the Southern Region
- University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign on behalf of the East Central Region

“High speed internet access is essential for our Illinois economy and in our everyday lives – and has been even more essential over the last year with many Illinois communities depending on high speed access for

remote learning, business, telehealth, and so much more,” **said DCEO Acting Director Sylvia Garcia.** “DCEO is proud to join Governor Pritzker and regional partners in the READY program to ensure communities are at the helm of creating a roadmap for digital equity and to drive broadband implementation in a way that levels the playing field for all Illinoisans.”

“Region 1 Planning Council is grateful for the opportunity to bring partners together as a part of the Broadband READY program,” **said Region 1 Planning Council Executive Director Michael Dunn, Jr.** “Focusing on the elimination of the digital divide in Winnebago & Boone Counties, DCEO’s funding helps establish a regional action plan as well as funding Rockford Public Library’s launch of a Chromebook and hot-spot lending program for its patrons. The READY program will help our region take practical steps toward closing the digital divide and enhancing broadband access, adoption and use.”

READY grantees may use funds to expand immediate broadband connectivity, conduct outreach and engagement to identify current digital inequities, and establish next steps toward creating a digital inclusion ecosystem through regional collaboration among institutions of higher education, planning councils, community and economic development organizations, schools, libraries, healthcare, and local leaders and other related stakeholders.

“We are so grateful to the Illinois DCEO for funding our proposal to implement a digital literacy program in Southeast Central Illinois. Many residents in our region lack not only reliable Internet access but also the skills necessary to be responsible digital citizens,” **said Zach Newell, Dean of Library Services at Eastern Illinois University.** “We are thankful to our public library, school district and community college partners who are helping us to present basic computer and information literacy workshops throughout the region.”

“The SAFHIRE team from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale is excited to be part of the Broadband READY initiative by DCEO. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the importance of broadband access for all,” **said Koushik Sinha, Assistant Professor, School of Computing at Southern Illinois University.** “This is a unique and timely opportunity for us to make a meaningful impact in our local community, particularly among the minority and economically-challenged sections of society. By working closely with experts and community leaders, our goal is to establish a replicable template for addressing digital inequality in southern Illinois, and in other rural and semi-urban regions of the state.”

“The Community Data Clinic (CDC) at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign has been energized by the cross regional network that the DCEO Broadband Initiative has activated. The DCEO’s rapidly responsive programming allows the CDC to leverage current opportunities and expand the work of our interdisciplinary team of researchers and community leaders – who bridge some of the state’s top talent in data visualization, data justice and community informatics. It also helps us to extend equitable access to technology and support for some of the most vulnerable households in East Central Illinois who are typically overlooked when it comes to technology, and to build a model for addressing the unique needs of poor households who are often burdened with a technology “dignity gap,” **said Anita Say Chan, School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.** “Via this work, we hope to highlight Illinois’ leadership in advancing digital equity in the region and beyond.”

The initial notice of funding for the first round of the READY program was announced in November 2020 by the Illinois Office of Broadband and Illinois Innovation Network. Proposals were reviewed and scored on a merit basis, prioritizing applicants’ ability to balance near-term broadband access expansion with regionwide stakeholder engagement and program integration capacity.

The initial READY grantees will be completing much of their initial work in fall 2021, with the second cohort following suit in spring 2022. Specific deliverables include a *Broadband READY Regional Report*, a *Digital Indicator Dashboards*, and *Digital Divide Elimination Plan* for each region. An aggregated product – the *Connect Illinois Broadband READY Report* – will contribute to annual updates of a statewide *Digital Indicator Dashboard* and *Digital Divide Elimination Plan*, which in turn will guide program integration and resource investment to close gaps in broadband equity and inclusion.

The Broadband READY program is part of a comprehensive *Digital Equity Package* announced by Governor Pritzker last fall to boost broadband capacity while addressing existing broadband equity gaps. The READY program and other investments to enhance community planning and equitable implementation will complement the Governor’s ambitious Connect Illinois program, a \$400 million plan to deliver universal access to high-speed internet statewide.

The second round of READY grants are now available, with a deadline of October 4, 2021, to apply. For more information on eligibility criteria, or application assistance visit the Illinois Office of Broadband website <https://www2.illinois.gov/dceo/ConnectIllinois/Pages/default.aspx>.

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