

Digital Inclusion Plan

A. Applicant's process to consult with the community and consider affordability

As a community-based broadband service provider, Hartington's success is integrally tied to the well-being and success of all residents within its service area, as such Hartington is committed to assuring that all individuals in the project area have access to comparable high-speed internet and the necessary knowledge and skills to use available digital technologies as a means of improving their life circumstances.

Hartington also understands the crucial need to address both the Internet access affordability issues and digital literacy concerns that prevent many lower-income individuals and families from subscribing to and using available broadband to their full benefit.

Before the covid-19 pandemic, individuals and businesses were becoming increasingly reliant on the Internet. The COVID-19 pandemic put an additional and disproportionate strain on residents lacking access to reliable, high-speed broadband service. The pandemic drove almost all commercial, educational, healthcare, religious and social activities online and made the internet an ever more crucial link to the essential things that people need. Further, the negative impacts associated with COVID 19, and a lack of broadband availability and affordability were especially harsh with respect to lower income individuals and families. In today's world, neither the above referenced disproportionate impacts caused by the pandemic nor broader poverty concerns can be addressed in a satisfactory way absent the availability of higher broadband service speeds and an advanced, readily scalable broadband network platform.

Hartington's outreach process will include discussions with potential subscribers in the area served by this NBBP grant. Hartington will discuss the critical needs of the rural area served by this NBBP grant including affordability and digital literacy. These discussions may be one on one discussions with a potential subscriber or group discussions with potential subscribers. If Hartington receives this NBBP grant, additional outreach will occur to address the needs of potential subscribers living in the project area to help ensure as many citizens as possible can subscribe and benefit from broadband Internet access provided by Hartington. Hartington will reach out as needed to address additional challenges to encourage the use of broadband Internet access to promote and enable work, education and healthcare access and monitoring.

The NPSC NBBP Grant Program requires that "all applicants must demonstrate that they are participating or will participate in the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), or any subsequent subsidy program(s) identified by Treasury, once a grant funded project is deployed." Hartington exists as a regulated "incumbent local exchange carrier" and an "Eligible Telecommunications Carrier"(ETC) under both state and federal law and as such already participates in the federal Affordable Connectivity Program and the federal Lifeline Program. If Hartington's requested NBBP grant is awarded and Hartington is able to extend its broadband services to the project area, it would also offer existing ACP and Lifeline benefits to all qualifying lower income subscribers.

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It should also be noted that Hartington is committed to efforts that will best inform and assist eligible low-income consumers of broadband service discounts so that they may take full advantage of any monthly discounts available under the FCC's ACP and/or "Lifeline Programs", or other federal or state programs aimed at making essential broadband services more affordable." With respect to the ACP program, Hartington has already taken specific steps enabling wide-spread use of that discount program by its existing eligible broadband consumers.

Hartington recognizes and is committed to ensuring that its Internet and Voice services offered in the project area always remain affordable to all locations within the project area. If Hartington's NBBP grant is awarded, when offering its broadband services to customers in the area served by Hartington, will offer both ACP and Lifeline benefits to all qualifying lower income subscribers.

As a means of keeping its broadband services affordable, Hartington also will offer service packages that do not come with any additional fees associated with equipment, installation, or require entry into any service term contracts.

Hartington will offer the 100/100 Mbps plan to low income consumers in addition to the availability of Lifeline and ACP discounts.

B. How grant award would address current challenges, including how the described broadband infrastructure deployments would directly enable work, education, and healthcare monitoring.

A recent NTCA – Rural Broadband Association "Foundation for Rural Service" (FRS) White Paper which examines more generally the importance of broadband in meeting nation-wide challenges properly notes that "while [broadband] capabilities are certainly important across all sectors, they are especially critical in the broader conversation about quality of life in rural America. Challenges associated with healthcare, education, poverty, access to services, economic opportunities and more are often exacerbated in rural settings due to factors such as geography (low population density, difficult terrain for building infrastructure, distance from medical facilities and other critical services, etc.)"

Hartington believes that bringing a higher capacity and more resilient broadband infrastructure is a mission critical first step to successfully address remote learning, remote work and telehealth needs for all individuals residing in the project area.

Remote Learning

During the pandemic, students without internet subscriptions were placed at a severe and structural disadvantage in keeping up with their peers who had such access. Educators fear that the degree of learning loss among those students without sufficient or reliable internet access may have set them back irrevocably. High speed Internet access continues to be a factor for students' academic success post COVID.

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During the COVID pandemic public schools serving residents within or near the proposed project area relied extensively on continuing daily classes through the use of online interactive video platforms like “Zoom” and using other online tools and email correspondence to provide assignments, communicate with their students collectively or individually, and continue progression through their various classes and planned grade curriculums. An inability to access the internet in the home or at any nearby location for purposes of participating in online classes and completing school assignments has been and continues to be particularly distressing, depriving their children of essential educational opportunities and putting them at risk of falling behind in advancing both their near-term and long-term educational goals.

As indicated in the FRS White Paper referenced earlier, “pandemic revealed the critical nature of broadband when response efforts sent millions of students and employees home to continue their education and work. Never before has reliable access to high-speed internet been as important as it has been during the COVID-19 pandemic.” While schools within the project area have resumed in-person instruction, the essential nature of internet access as it relates to continuing education for both children and adults cannot be understated. Students and teachers having sufficient and reliable internet access is needed not only for interactive video instruction, but for correspondence between teachers and students regarding school assignments, assistance with homework assignments, online research, educational reference materials and software applications, etc.

The internet or “[d]igital access” available to students for attending class remotely or otherwise being able to engage in online learning may also vary significantly depending on access to usable computer devices within the household. Families with lower income or lower levels of educational attainment are also less likely to have a computer, tablet or other devices that may be necessary to access and fully utilize online learning platforms.

Telehealth

Various medical hospitals and clinics are located in proximity to the project area. These medical provider facilities like other health care providers throughout the U.S., have substantially increased the use of telehealth in their operations, making the availability of a good broadband connection for patient video conferencing appointments with doctors and nurses critically important.

All of these medical facilities offered during the pandemic and continue not only telehealth services including services such as virtual two-way video appointments with physicians, physicians assistants and nurses, telehealth counseling for both physical and mental health, at-home dialysis, and online portal access, etc. All of these telehealth services/applications are dependent on a reliable home broadband connection.

Remote Work and other Work-Related Broadband Needs

There are no “critical community facilities” within the proposed project area, such as the County Courthouse, K-12 schools or medical clinics or hospitals within the proposed project area. These essential community facilities are located outside the project, a fair distance from many of the area residents and business.

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The remoteness of the project area locations underscores the importance of the affected residents and businesses having access to high-speed broadband for virtually accessing online information and applications for their work, education, health or other personal needs (such as those used for video conferencing, distance learning, email correspondence, file or content sharing, telehealth, remote work, remote banking, precision agricultural applications, and buying or selling goods or services, etc.) .

The shift to telework has worked well for those who have jobs that could quickly adjust by going remote but not so for those working in service industry, health care, home care, retail and delivery drives unable to avoid leaving their homes for work performance. A full economic recovery from the pandemic requires broadband not only for remote work, but also as a means of assuring that everyone has access to markets and services from their home and they need broadband and affordable internet access to do so.

C. Planned actions to increase digital literacy and inclusion.

Hartington will also, in addition to increasing awareness of the federal ACP and Lifeline broadband services discount programs, through its community involvement, marketing efforts, website content and other subscriber communications will work toward improving the digital technology knowledge and skills of residents throughout the proposed projects area. This will include a focus on informed of other resources and tools that may be best suited to improving the digital knowledge and skills of its subscribers, including for example instruction to subscribers in the following areas:

- assisting subscribers in understanding the basics of being connected to broadband;
- knowing how much bandwidth is required to meet their bandwidth needs;
- troubleshooting home Wi-Fi issues;
- what are the best practices for the safe and responsible use of broadband, including, but not limited to, identifying phishing, password safety, protecting your identity, and cyber security;
- broadband utilization for personal skills development;
- broadband utilization for telehealth, remote learning, and job skill development;
- the availability of cloud-based productivity tools.