Internet for All Webinar Series: Enabling Middle Mile Broadband Infrastructure Program
Moderator: Arica Cox
May 19, 2022

Arica Cox

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Hello. I'd like to welcome you to the fourth session in our Internet for All webinar series to discuss the new bipartisan infrastructure law high-speed internet grant programs.

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My name is Arica Cox and I'm a telecommunications policy analyst with the Office of Internet Connectivity and Growth here at the National Telecommunications and Information Administration or you may know us as NTIA.

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I'll be serving as the moderator for today's session. Today, we'll be providing a general overview of the enabling middle mile broadband infrastructure program also referred to as the middle mile program. Before we begin, I'd like to take a moment to review our agenda and introduce our speakers today.

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We'll start today's session with a welcome from Doug Kinkoph, the associate administrator of our office of internet connectivity group. We'll then move to the formal presentation and overview of the enabling middle mile broadband infrastructure program by our middle mile program director, Sarah Bleau. Finally, we'll move into a moderated Q & A session where Sarah and I will be joined by Nick Alexander, a telecommunications policy analyst for the office of internet connectivity and growth. I'll now turn it over to Doug Kinkoph.

Doug Kinkoph

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Thank you, Arica. Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Doug Kinkoph and I'm the associate administrator for the national telecommunications and information administration office of internet connectivity and growth. Thank you for joining us today. Today's webinar on the middle mile program is part of the Internet for All initiative.

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For decades we've talked about the digital divide, however, the last couple of years alone have shown that a strong internet connection is vital for our country's infrastructure. The goal of the Internet for All initiative and the middle mile program is to close the digital divide by providing all Americans with access to high-speed, reliable, and affordable internet. Strong Internet connectivity powers opportunities for individuals, communities, and industry.

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This $1 billion program gives eligible entities the ability to leverage existing resources to connect unserved and underserved communities. And I look forward to reviewing proposal in a while project when our application portal opens on June 21. Now I'll pass it to our middle mile program director, Sarah Bleau, who will go over the program in greater detail. Thank you for joining us this afternoon.

Sarah Bleau

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Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, my name is Sarah Bleau. I am with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, also known as NTIA office of internet connectivity and growth as part of the Internet for All program launched. Welcome to today's webinar on the middle mile program.

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Last week NTIA launched three Internet for All programs, including the middle mile program in support of President Biden's infrastructure investment and jobs act. And, as the President made clear in his announcement, we'll make sure every single American has access to high quality, affordable, high-speed internet. We're going to drive down the price for families who have service now and make it easier for families who don't have affordable service. The last couple of years alone have undeniably shown us that a strong internet connection is vital for our country's infrastructure.

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Unfortunately, not everyone has conductivity or high-speed connectivity and as a result, too many Americans lack access to critical resources and opportunities. Opportunities that empower our economy and support education and health care. Most importantly, it connects us to loved ones and strengthens our social ties. To help individuals in our country, we're working to bring affordable reliable high-speed internet to all Americans. This will help maximize savings for education, stimulate growth, lower costs for healthcare, and strengthen our community ties. For example, high speed internet helps students' complete homework assignments, do research, and apply to college or trade schools.

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High-speed internet allows businesses to connect with consumers, increase sales, create jobs, and compete for talent. It enables patients to utilize telehealth options, while lowering hospital administrative costs and improving patient health. First responders are also able to respond quickly and effectively to emergencies.

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Finally, high-speed internet fosters ties with within and between communities from live streaming large events to connecting with neighbors. The $1 billion middle mile grant program will fund middle mile infrastructure expansion to reduce the cost of connecting unserved and underserved areas. I will cover the highlights of the program before we dive into the technical and logistical details of the grant program.

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First, middle mile infrastructure refers to the midsection of the internet infrastructure. This section carries large amounts of data at high speeds over long distances bridging the backbone of internet infrastructure to the last mile which connects end users.

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Second, who is eligible to apply for middle mile program funding? Eligible entities include, but are not limited to, government entities, utilities companies, and nonprofits that provide internet services.

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Third, how can eligible entities use the funds? Well, grant funds can be used in a variety of ways that contribute to middle mile expansion, including construction improvement or acquisition of facilities and equipment, it can be used for engineering design, permitting, and work related to projects that can be used for personnel costs, including salaries and benefits and other costs necessary to complete the program's activities.

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Finally, what are the important deadlines? As you know, last week NTIA published the notice of funding opportunity which we call the NOFO, on Friday, May 13, but we will not begin accepting applications for the middle mile program until June 21. Applications which must be submitted electronically through our application portal ,will be due by the end of the day on September 30th.

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Awards will roll out no earlier than March 1 of 2023. There will be money available by this time next year for the middle mile program. The timeline for deployment and build out of this program is five years. And, again, these are just highlights, I will go over each point in greater detail momentarily.

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As I mentioned previously, middle mile broadly means the midsection of internet infrastructure. More specifically, middle mile includes least dark fiber, what we call inner office transport backhaul. It can be connections between carrier neutral internet exchange facilities. It might mean carrier neutral submarine cable landing stations subsea or undersea cables. It could be transport conductivity to data centers. It might be what's called sometimes special access transport and other similar services, it can be wired and it can be wireless. For example, it might be microwave capacity, radio tower access, or other private wireless services such as towers fiber or microwave links.

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I already mentioned a few eligible entities, but I will dig into the details a little bit further here. These eligible entities, according to the statute include: government entities, meaning states political subdivisions of states and tribal or native

governments. It might mean industries such as tech companies, electric utilities, utility co-ops, public utility districts, and telecom companies or co-ops. It might mean nonprofits foundations, corporations, institutions, associations, regional planning councils, native entities, and economic development authorities. These entities might apply for the middle mile grant program individually or they might work in partnership with one with one another. For this funding opportunity, the agency will award up to $980 million total. The individual grants, a grant project will likely range between 5-100 million dollars, but this range is not a required minimum or maximum.

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However, if the eligible entity requests an amount outside of five or $100 million, they must provide a reasonable explanation for the variance in their project size. Grants might be used for construction; it might be used for improving or acquiring middle mile infrastructure. For example, building improving or buying facilities or equipment grants might be used to support the engineering design, permitting costs, as well as work related to environmental historical and cultural reviews. Grant money might be used for personnel costs like salaries or fringe benefits for staff and consultants. Depending on the project and the entity consultants, might need to be hired as project managers or subject matter experts', financial analysts, accountants, and attorneys.

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Funds can also cover some pre application expenses that are incurred after the NOFO and before the grant award. These costs might be related to environmental reviews or financial audits. It's important to note that grant funds for pre application expenses will only be covered up to $50,000, that's five zero thousand dollars. Finally, grant funding may be allocated to programmatic activities, excluding the ineligible costs which are listed within the NOFO.

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The program focuses on several priority areas to bring high-speed, affordable internet to all Americans. This slide will list a few of the largest priorities that we're looking at for project prioritization and selection for funding. I will go through the list and offer examples. But really take a look, I encourage you, I urge you to please go take a look at the notice of funding opportunity where you will find key details regarding prioritization and selection.

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So, let's dig into underserved or unserved areas. An underserved area is an area where the minimum bandwidth is not at least 100 megabits down and 20 megabits per second up. An unserved area is 25 megabits per second down and three megabits per second up. So, underserved means areas where you're not getting at least 100 over 20. Unserved means areas where you're not getting at least 25 over three.

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Affordability, it is our priority to improve affordability for users in existing markets. In other words, it is beneficial for applicants to demonstrate the likelihood of reducing end user prices by funding middle mile infrastructure. For example, an applicant might demonstrate a decline in middle mile costs that are likely to flow through to consumer broadband prices as a result of interconnection policies.

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Regarding geographic diversity, we want to benefit communities across this country. An example of geographic diversity in an application includes the morality and the socio-economic indicators in the proposed service area. When it comes to priority communities within the NOFO, we identify the communities where increased high - speed affordable internet access is deemed critical, including high poverty counties, persistent poverty counties, tribal communities, etc.

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Open access refers to eligible entities who offer nondiscriminatory use of its network to other providers at wholesale and reasonable rates. Resiliency, for example, would be the creation of alternative network connection apps to prevent a single point of failure on a broadband network. Shovel ready means that the project is capable of completion within a two-year period and fiscal sustainability. In other words, the project should be fiscally financially sustainable throughout and beyond the award period.

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As mentioned previously, middle mile projects must be completed and operating no later than five years from when the award is made. By year two, within the NOFO, we're asking that 40% of project miles should be complete. By the end of year 3, 60 percent, and at year four, 80%.

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There are limited and qualifying circumstances where a one-year extension for build out will be granted. And I think it's worth mentioning also we've been talking to many of you, we understand that there are supply chain concerns, there's workforce development concerns. These are opportunities. This timeline that's been laid out is yet what we endeavor to complete within five years that this would be completed. The middle program and its awarded entities will support Internet for All goal to increase broadband access affordability and adoption.

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To increase accessibility, the program is designed to aggregate large quantities of traffic between points to improve access enabling future investment in infrastructure to reach the end users location. Middle mile expansion will also carry traffic to remote unserved and underserved locations. It increases affordability by reducing the cost of connecting unserved and underserved areas and unlocking future opportunities for cost effective last mile services.

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The program funds projects in diverse geographies and priority communities and it supports connections for last mile services, including where there are community or anchor tenant commitments to adopt services. Every stakeholder plays a role in the middle mile program. Providers, states, tribal governments, local governments, community anchor institutions, community organizations, and individuals. There are many ways that stakeholders can get involved. It is critical that each of us participate in the conversation to ensure that we make the most of the middle mile program and the Internet for All initiative.

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We look forward to working with you and we encourage you to visit the Internet for All website at InternetforAll.gov to learn more about middle mile and the other programs. We also invite you, and encourage you, to submit questions to middlemile@NTIA.gov. If you have questions you would like us to address in the last minutes of this webinar, please submit them through the Q & A pod in this zoom. We will go through as many questions as time allows. And with that, let's begin the Q & A portion of the webinar.

Arica Cox

00:18:05.550 --> 00:18:11.550
Alright, thank you Sarah for that presentation. We are going to move into the Q & A portion of our webinar. And in addition to Sarah Bleau, I'd like to welcome Nick Alexander to this portion of the webinar. Nick is a telecommunications policy analyst for the office of internet connectivity and growth and he'll be partnering with Sarah this afternoon to answer some of your questions. For those on the webinar, feel free to continue to enter your questions into the Q & A function, not the chat but the Q & A function, and we'll do our best to get through all of your questions. We have a lot already so anything that we're not able to answer today, we'll attempt to integrate into future webinars and the web resources that were provided to you during the presentation. So, let's take a look at what questions we've got so far. The first one is regarding open access. I'm going to ask Sarah. Sarah, can you explain open access as it relates to this program?

Sarah Bleau

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Sure, that's a that's a great question. Thank you for asking that. Open access as it relates to this middle mile program means allowing nondiscriminatory access. Making access available at wholesale rates to other middle mile service providers. I hope that that answers that question.

Arica Cox

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Perfect. Next one is for Nick. Nick, can you use middle mile grant funds to improve projects that have been funded with other types of federal funding?

Nick Alexander

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The answer to that is yes. Subject to the obligation, will the statute that federal funds be used to supplement, but not supplant other funding assets. So, the application would have to explain how these federal funds were going to build upon the other federal funds of use.

Arica Cox	**00:20:03.660 --> 00:20:09.660** Perfect. So, kind of along the same lines in terms of use of funds. We've got a couple more questions. Can applicants seek middle mile funding to only support a public power grid functionality? I think what they're saying here, in other words, can a public power operator get funding if they don't intend to directly provide internet service to the public?
Nick Alexander	**00:20:28.620 --> 00:20:41.070** Certainly public power operators are eligible to apply for middle mile funding, and I think that, under the language of the notice of funding opportunity, they could submit an application for that purpose. I do think that if you look at the scoring criteria that are set forth in the NOFO that such a project would have a difficult time being funded if there is oversubscription.
Arica Cox	**00:20:54.120 --> 00:21:13.710** Thank you, Nick. A couple questions here, we have come in regards to community anchor institutions. On the middle mile NOFO, if there is a community anchor institution requirement. Is there a list of CAIs from a federal perspective, broken down by state that's downloadable?
Sarah Bleau	**00:21:16.350 --> 00:21:17.580** I'll take that question. First of all, I just want to remind everybody that the middle mile grant program, the notice of funding opportunity was posted with BEAD and DE and that's likely why you're here, because you read through it and you have questions. That went up last week and then we will post, we will open up the application to our NTIA grants portal on June 21. The reason it's taking, you know we open up the application window for both BEAD and DE right out of the gate. **00:21:49.860 --> 00:22:05.880** We are taking our time with middle mile because it's the complete application and we're trying to be very thoughtful. We're trying to build in templates where we can and provide templates, where possible. So, the reason I provide that context is because the statute and the NOFO indicates that if you are providing fiber as the solution for your middle mile technology that any community anchor institution within 1000 feet would have access to this network. That an end user, excuse me a last mile service provider could do a gig of that per second up and down to that community anchor institution. So, what we are doing with the application is we are providing a template that we're asking applicants to complete, we will not tell you which community anchor institutions are within 1000 feet of your fiber solution but we will provide you the template so that you can fill this in and then upload it to your application. This information is really community anchor institutions are vital to our country. And so, while the statute requires that your fiber solution lists of connects all community anchor institutions, were also allowing those of you this middle mile grant program doesn't dictate what type of technology you're using so if it's fiber, definitely have to show us which community institutions you are, you will be connecting or make available.

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If you are not using fiber technology, if you're using wireless or something other, we will also encourage you to complete the template. You're not required to complete it, but if you'd like to complete the template and fill in the community anchor institutions, that could come online within 1000 feet, that would be very helpful. That was a lot, but I wanted to provide some context, so thank you.

Arica Cox

00:23:44.220 --> 00:23:57.360
Thanks for that, Sarah. Now we're going to pivot. Looks like we've got a few questions related to the definitions of unserved and underserved and then in terms of qualifications for the grant in terms of served and underserved and underserved communities. So, the first one I think I'm going to throw a few out at once, and you can kind of grab them all, if you will. The first one is, can you please provide a little more definition to unserved and underserved or a little more clarity to that? And then, in terms of community qualifications, would a community qualify for a middle mile broadband grant if census tracts reflect that only 2 to 7 percent of residents lack access to broadband? And then, one more I'm just going to add on top of that, because it kind of all goes together. Are there median income eligibility requirements in order to qualify?

Sarah Bleau

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Why don't you begin.

Arica Cox

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Nick, do you want to take a stab at that.

Nick Alexander

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So, I think working in reverse order, and I think I may need to be reminded about what the three questions are, as we go that. The Middle mile grant program does not have income eligibility requirements built into it. I recall that the purpose of this grant program is to build infrastructure that does not connect to end user locations and does not itself provide service to end users so there is no income requirement associated with or household income requirement that is associated with either the qualification for potential grantees or for the scoring criteria. I'm sorry Arica, what were the other two questions?

Arica Cox

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So, just a little more clarity around unserved and underserved, the difference between the two.

Nick Alexander

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So, the definitions of unserved and underserved are set forth in the statute and those are reflected in the notice of funding opportunity. And I recognize that they are not a model of clarity, but I think that the key phrase to hone in on there, and this speaks to another question that had popped up about these two definitions. That the FCC is what the statute calls the fixed broadband map, which is the forthcoming FCC broadband data act maps. That will be, as we understand it, released this fall, are the tools that the statute directs NTIA to use to identify

whether an area is unserved or underserved. So, when we are evaluating claims by a potential applicant with respect to whether or not there's going to be a particular benefit to unserved or underserved areas, those are the maps that we will, we will look to, to the extent that they're available.

Arica Cox

00:26:41.790 --> 00:26:49.740
Thank you, Nick. We've got a few questions. You know, Sarah in your presentation, you talked about the entities that are eligible to apply. I think, maybe some clarity is needed around specific entities such as; can a church organization apply or state libraries or academic institutions? Are they eligible to apply for this program?

Sarah Bleau

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There is a there, thank you for that question. There's a laundry list of entities who are eligible to apply for the program. Community anchor institutions are not listed as one of them. I will say that there are state and local governments, tribal governments, there's nonprofit, there's public utilities, there's telecom companies. And most importantly, it's a partnership also. This is a competitive grant and I expect that we will be oversubscribed. It's only billion dollars or really $980 million, that is going to be made available, so I encourage partnerships.

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But, unless any of these churches or schools are defined as also some kind of nonprofit, I don't I think the answer is no, it's not an eligible entity. Nick, do you have anything to add to that?

Nick Alexander

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I would just say that, to the extent that an entity is not sure whether it is an eligible instance to the extent that a potential applicant is. I'm sure that it is in fact an eligible entity. Then you should send us an email at middlemile@ntia.gov articulating your case and we can see if we can evaluate that. But the key is to fit squarely within one of the categories that is identified in the definition of eligible entity on page five of the notice of funding opportunity.

Sarah Bleau

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And I would add to that also, look at, read through the NOFO and we will certainly be able to provide more details shortly. Like I said, the application window will be opening up June 21. And we will soon have a webinar talking about, we've created a checklist of what you can expect to see in the application. Just to prepare everybody mentally. We're going to be looking for experience managing, operating, running this kind of a network, so I would give some thought to that as well.

Arica Cox

00:29:16.410 --> 00:29:29.310
Great, thank you Sarah and Nick. So, as folks begin to prepare to get ready to submit their applications once that window opens, we've got a few questions in terms of eligibility on use of funds. So, is it possible to receive funding to pay for consulting legal and engineering fees necessary to prepare applications for any of the IIJA broadband programs? Nick?

Sarah Bleau	00:29:45.510 --> 00:29:46.410 Is that one or the other?
Arica Cox	00:29:47.100 --> 00:29:47.640 Either one.
Sarah Bleau	00:29:48.360 --> 00:29:49.170 Now go ahead, Nick.
Nick Alexander	00:29:50.310 --> 00:30:04.530 So, pre application expenses are addressed in section, for 4I1D, on page 33 of the NOFO and to the extent that the expenses that you articulated fall into that description, and the answer is yes, otherwise, the answer is no.
Sarah Bleau	00:30:12.810 --> 00:30:17.790 Nick is the lawyer can be very specific and find out and that's very helpful. Thank you, Nick.
Arica Cox	00:30:18.810 --> 00:30:31.890 I'm also seeing in the chat folks asking for the email address and all of that information. Carole will be posting the information you need in the chat and it's also available on our website as well.
	00:30:32.490 --> 00:30:48.480 Let's see what other questions we've had come in. It's concerning the eligibility of state maps. Nick, I'm going to throw this one to you. Can we use state maps for the eligibility thresholds for the definition of unserved and underserved communities?
Nick Alexander	00:30:49.470 --> 00:31:03.090 So, again, the definitions of unserved and underserved in the statute and in the middle mile NOFO refer to the FCC broadband maps. We will rely on those maps to the extent that they are available. That doesn't mean that an applicant can't supplement the case using other data, but we will rely on the FCC maps to the extent that they're available.
Arica Cox	00:31:16.140 --> 00:31:17.760 Okay. Thank you, Nick. Let's see what else we've got coming through the Q & A here. In terms of the use of funds, there's a question regarding land acquisition. Does that fall under the scope of this program if an entity wants to acquire land to continue out their project? Sarah, I'll throw that one to you.
Sarah Bleau	00:31:50.430 --> 00:31:53.850 I just in my own experience sometimes, when you build a network, you might need to buy some land to, especially when you buy them that when you build a middle mile network, you might have to buy some land in order to co locate or power up your equipment for whatever purpose.

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So, as long as if that were the purpose of buying the land, then that would be an eligible expense for the middle mile program. We would want to see the, other thing that we're doing with these applications for the middle mile program is providing templates for the budget narrative for the detailed budget justification and for the 424C to try to help as much as we can to make sure that the buckets of items that can be expensed, that are being requested, are consistent and across the documents. So, I hope that helps.

Arica Cox

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Thanks Sarah. So, we're back to questions regarding the application. If an entity has, they're looking at multiple areas of BEAD, it looks like this question says multiple areas of need. For example, urban high poverty zones and rural unserved and underserved areas that may require them to have different partners. Are they allowed to submit multiple separate applications to cover the different partnerships or should they look at submitting one kind of holistic application that covers the multiple areas they're expected to serve with those multiple partners?

Sarah Bleau

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I think that's a great question and I'm going to jump on it, if that's okay.

Arica Cox

Sure, go ahead.

Sarah Bleau

But yes, absolutely. And I have quadruple checked to make sure that we will be accepting applications. You can put in as many as you would like. I realize there are some large companies, you might have different projects by region. There might be, just like the example that was listed there, you might have an urban project where you want to align with one particular partner, and yet you might have some little bit further away, you might have a more rural project to address that need and you might want to align with yet another partner. So yes, absolutely. The answer is you may create more than one application in the middle mile grant program.

Arica Cox

00:34:11.790 --> 00:34:20.280
Perfect Thank you, Sarah. And along those same lines, in terms of partnerships. Are working with others, we've got a question, Nick I think I'm going to point this one to you. Where someone is asking whether states acting as I guess pass through entities can sub can be the main applicant and then sub award grant sub awards to help complete the project to other entities?

Nick Alexander

00:34:37.470 --> 00:34:48.570
So, the short answer to that question is yes. The longer answer is that the state would be the applicant for the award. And then, under the general federal grant rules 2 CFR 200 and the Department of Commerce grants manual, that state certainly has the ability to some grant or to subcontract in order to effectuate the purposes of the grant.

Arica Cox	00:35:05.790 --> 00:35:06.540 Thank you, Nick. There's a question here coming up about the use of funds and fund matching. And I want to throw this one to you, Nick. First of all, can you use ARPA funds as the match requirement if the applicant were awarded a grant through another program? So, I think this kind of speaks to you know, a broader topic right, in terms of matching funds and who is who they're eligible to use and who not to use? Want to take that one?
Nick Alexander	00:35:37.830 --> 00:35:54.060 So, the general rule is that federal funds may not be used as matching funds unless the statute that governs the federal funds that you want to use as the match expressly permit. 00:35:55.080 --> 00:36:02.280 I think that there's some confusion here, because in the BEAD program, which is the broadband equity access and deployment program, the $45 billion program that the NOFO was issued on the same day as this one. That statute does expressly permit certain classes of federal funds to be used for the match. In the case of the last mile, pardon me, the middle mile program, the statute that governs this particular notice of funding opportunity, it does not so permit. So, ARPA funds would not be permissible for match unless the ARPA funds themselves say or the statute that governs the orphans expressly says that they could be.
Arica Cox	00:36:34.170 --> 00:36:34.470 Thanks, Nick.
Nick Alexander	00:36:34.680 --> 00:36:38.550 I do not believe it does, but I am not, I can't offer advice on that.
Arica Cox	00:36:40.320 --> 00:36:59.640 Thanks, Nick. Sarah, someone has asked just in terms of general communication, will each state have a designated FPO or contact to reach out to and, if so, in the meantime prior to application, if folks have questions, how do they get in contact with you or a member of your team?
Sarah Bleau	00:37:01.170 --> 00:37:10.500 Well, that that is, I think communication is golden and the more we do it, the better. Number one, I would say we have this Internet for All website, please take a look, that's where you'll find our NOFO, that's where you'll find information about upcoming webinars. We're doing one in just one week where I think we're supposed to talk about the application and the checklist, so there's that. We've also got the middlemile@ntia.gov email too. Please, we're centralizing all of these questions, were flagging them for FAQs. We're responding to you as quickly as we can. 00:37:37.770 --> 00:37:55.050 So please, I think we'll probably put that in, there we go. Maci is on top of it. I think you may see if you send your question into middlemile@NTIA.gov, then we will endeavor to answer your question as quickly as possible, I will also say that the

middle mile program is separate and distinct in a away from the broadband equity and access deployment plan called which we call BEAD. BEAD is like Nick said, the big plan that brings almost 45 billion to the states and territories. And that particular program, we are trying to bring federal program officers on board in each state to work with the state and local governments.

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On the other hand, with middle mile, we don't have that same team. We, it will be myself and, and a handful of others and we are actually geographically dispersed. We're not all centralized in one place, might be close to your state but if you want to use that middlemile@ntia.gov email address, that is the best way to get ahold of us.

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Read the NOFO, we're going to post FAQs pretty quickly. Our goal is to post these very regularly and we'll have these webinars. We'll spend a lot of time talking about the different components of the application. It's so important to make sure that you understand the application and what we're looking for. Because you understand the NOFO, the quality of the application is the most important. So, we're really going to spend a lot of time on the application in the webinars. But yes, please send emails middlemile@ntia.gov. Thank you.

Arica Cox

00:39:25.320 --> 00:39:38.820
Thanks, Sarah. In terms of the management of awards, we've got a question come in and I'm going to throw this one to Nick. Can you confirm that NTIA will manage awards and not individual states? And how does that kind of impact tribal authorities as well. So overall, can you speak a little bit to the management of the awards?

Nick Alexander

00:39:49.020 --> 00:39:58.140
Absolutely. So again, I think that this is an important distinction between the middle mile program and the BEAD program. The BEAD program will allocate funding to the states and territories, who, in turn, will select sub grantees to build out network and conduct other authorized uses under the BEAD program. And the case of the middle mile program, NTIA will be directly administering the awards here. So, applicants are applying to NTIA and NTIA will run the evaluation and selection process.

Arica Cox

00:40:24.570 --> 00:40:25.800
Perfect, thanks Nick. So, there's a couple questions about match requirements and cost share. We talked a little bit about match. Someone says here, it is noted in the NOFO, but it mentions a waiver of the match for native tribes. Is this true? How is that waiver obtained? So, can you talk a little bit, Nick, about special rules for tribal entities?

Nick Alexander

00:40:50.070 --> 00:40:58.680
So, I believe it's subsection 4G of the NOFO, which is on, starts on page 14 and runs over to page 15. The waivers for tribal governments and native entities are discussed there, and it also describes the process under which a tribal entity can

identify unserved and underserved areas in a way that is separate and distinct from the way that other entities are required to do so.

00:41:20.160 --> 00:41:20.970
Arica Cox
Thanks Nick. All right, let's see what else we've got in the Q & A. Sarah, as folks are beginning to get ready for the opening of application submission, can you talk a little bit about if there are any steps that they should be taking now to prepare in advance or any resources they may want to take a look at to just make sure that they're prepared for when that time comes to submit their, to prepare and submit their application?

00:41:58.590 --> 00:42:13.950
Sarah Bleau
Yeah, I wholeheartedly encourage and urge, and the best resource that you can use to prepare for the application is understanding the notice of funding. Nick had the luxury of working on it for a few months. So, he can quote these things, and I think it would be great if we have like a game by the time we come to the application to see who remembers the most bullets and paragraphs and page numbers like Nick.

00:42:26.550 --> 00:42:43.740
But yes, no the notice the funding opportunity, it is, when I first read the statute, I had a hard time trying to follow it. The statute language and now we've got the notice of funding and we're trying to make; we've tried to organize it in a way that's very clear. And, but it's it takes a couple of times. Use the time between now and June 21 to understand what are the different reviews that we're going to be going through. There's the different reviews, what are we going to be, you know what's the prioritization, or you know, what are the different criteria that we're going to be evaluating.

00:43:10.440 --> 00:43:18.840
I would definitely keep an eye on those and keep a little cheat sheet on the side so that when you see the application, you can think oh, these are the different things that NTIA is going to be looking at so I need to make sure that I address this in this particular section. So, I really, I can't tell you how important it is to make sure that you understand what it is that we're going to be evaluating and all of that is found in the notice funding opportunity.

00:43:39.630 --> 00:43:50.340
Arica Cox
Thanks Sarah, good advice there. I've got a question for Nick that has come up in terms of offsetting the cost of already incurred funds. So, or I'm sorry, already incurred expenses. So, for example, the Commonwealth of Kentucky has been working on constructing a statewide middle mile network that's almost completed and they've got a portion left of the fiber remaining to install. Is this grant available to be used to offset the cost of expenses already incurred, or is this just for new construction?

Nick Alexander	00:44:18.750 --> 00:44:19.860 These funds are not available for expenses that have already been incurred, these are for the construction or improvement of new middle mile facilities.
Arica Cox	00:44:31.260 --> 00:44:33.090 So, new middle mile facilities. So, anything that has already been incurred, this grant cannot be used for. In terms of, Sarah, anchor, there's another question about anchor institutions, and I think we need, some folks need some clarity around really the role that those anchor institutions play in this grant program. So many rural communities do not have anchor institutions. And so, is that, can you talk a little bit about if that impacts applicants in any way or if they're still encouraged to apply if they don't have an anchor institution in their community?
Sarah Bleau	00:45:12.660 --> 00:45:19.020 Oh, absolutely. We would, the community anchor institutions should be a benefit, a beneficiary of this program. But just because there, if there really are no community anchor institutions in your in, nearby you where you want, where this project is located that that's okay. The goal here is to bring affordable and high-speed internet to all Americans and to reduce the, reduce the cost, to provide resiliency, and all that stuff. So yeah, please go ahead, please, and I encourage you to apply.
Arica Cox	00:45:46.950 --> 00:45:52.740 Thanks, Sarah. So, can an entity that is still in the information gathering stages or planning stages of their broadband implementation project, they're not quite ready to construct or at implementation, maybe they're still doing some research, maybe they're still doing some planning. Can they still apply?
Sarah Bleau	00:46:09.930 --> 00:46:29.370 Yeah. Yes, in fact. I mean we; I don't know why you wouldn't be able to apply. It is defined, it's explained in the notice of funding. Some of the experience that we're going to be looking for including the financial sustainability, so I don't know who, who's asking that question. What else is going on, but if you're in the planning stages, that's probably a really good time to be applying for this. Nick, do you have anything to add to that?
Nick Alexander	00:46:41.040 --> 00:46:42.570 I think the only thing that I would add, and this is probably just my assumption of not fully understanding the question, but an application doesn't need to be completed and filed so the first step that we will take when we go into the review process is to make sure that all of the elements that are articulated in the NOFO are actually included in the application. So, if you are currently in the planning phase, that's totally fine. But when you submit the application, then you need to submit an application that fully meets the requirements of the notice of funding opportunity.
Arica Cox	00:47:13.020 --> 00:47:20.430 Great, so that's the key right. Making sure that your application is complete and meets all the requirements that have been laid out, correct. Thanks, Nick. So, as we kind of begin to wrap up here, I know we've got a little bit more time, but I'd like to

ask both Nick and Sarah. If there's maybe one thing that you want to want to emphasize, right. Everybody's really excited and getting ready to gather all the information that they can so that they can be prepared for when the application window opens. If there's one thing that you'd like to emphasize or one major takeaway that you'd like to share on the webinar today, what would that be? What one key piece of information or instruction do you think is important for everyone on this webinar to walk away with? I'm going to start with Sarah.

Sarah Bleau

00:48:04.680 --> 00:48:21.750
Well, I do think that reading, that understanding the notice of funding opportunity is the most important piece. But I also, I didn't I, this is a competitive program and there's, I wish that we had $45 billion just for middle mile, but we have one. So, I do encourage you to ask questions of us, send your emails into middlemile@NTIA.gov, attend the webinars, give us your questions here. We will, we're collecting all these questions and we will post these in our FAQs. Because it is competitive, we probably cannot comment on your particular application if this looks good or if that looks good. But we will certainly try to make sure that the intent of this program is as clear as possible through the webinars and through the FAQs that were able to publish. Thank you for asking.

Arica Cox

00:49:02.550 --> 00:49:05.010
Sure. Nick, what about you?

Nick Alexander

00:49:06.480 --> 00:49:14.970
So, one of the questions that I saw fly by in the chat was, what does it mean to coordinate with the state broadband office? And that very short paragraph in the NOFO is actually a very important one, because the way that we are thinking about this funding is as part of the overall federal effort and state effort and local effort to ensure that broadband, affordable broadband is available across the entire nation.

00:49:37.380 --> 00:49:51.900
And it is our hope that the projects that we fund with these middle mile dollars are going to help the effort of making sure that last mile projects that they helped to interconnect are more widely available and more affordable. The state broadband offices are the ones who are going to be heavily involved in both the BEAD programs. They're also going to be involved in distributing other federal funding that comes from Treasury and that comes from the United States Department of Agriculture and can help to identify where there is middle mile need within the state. And so, I hope that the applicants will contact those broadband offices early and take that input and help it to shape their applications.

Arica Cox

00:50:29.970 --> 00:50:37.650
Thank you, Nick. It looks like we've got time for maybe one or two more questions that just popped up. Nick, can you talk a little bit about, there are some questions on scoring and priority and/or preferences for nonprofits, minority, or women owned entities. Are there any preferences or priorities given in the scoring that you can talk about from the NOFO?

Nick Alexander

00:50:56.400 --> 00:51:10.950
So, the scoring criteria are set forth in the NOFO and the prioritization scheme does not, neither prioritization, nor the precise scoring criteria look to the nature of the entity as something that provides preference. So, to the extent that one would want a nonprofit to receive a higher score than a subunit of the state, that's not something that the NOFO contemplates. Rather, the points are assigned based on the criteria that are articulated in the scoring section of the NOFO.

Arica Cox

00:51:34.620 --> 00:51:40.260
Thank you, Nick. And it looks like I've got time for another question. Sarah, I'm going to throw this one to you. Let's see. In terms of the FCC map, are applicants restricted to only use the FCC mapping layers solely for the unserved and underserved?

Sarah Bleau

00:51:56.670 --> 00:51:59.130
Well, I'll say that Nick has pointed out a few times the definition of unserved and underserved comes from the FCC maps. And I'll say, in general, because there's the new location data maps that will be out later this fall and that will be the basis for the BEAD program. Currently, the FCC data that's available to us is by census blocks as unserved and underserved. Well, at the maximum speeds that carriers turn into the FCC with her twice a year from 477 forms. And I, I know that there are states I have talked to, a lot of and local leaders who have actually been going a little bit more granular. For a while now, doing speed test data, getting snapshots from households on the bandwidth that's available. So, to answer your question, I think the more granular the data that we have the better. Nick, is that okay to say?

Nick Alexander

00:53:11.670 --> 00:53:13.350
The more data, the better is an absolutely true statement.

Arica Cox

00:53:16.290 --> 00:53:28.380
Thank you. So, we've got a question about states working together and interstate build. So, are interstate middle mile builds possible under this program? And then, another question kind of that went along with this is; are state's able to form a partnership and work together to apply, especially if they have a build that spans across the states? Who wants to take that one?

Nick Alexander

00:53:44.820 --> 00:53:46.080
The answer is yes. Both the way the term eligible entity is defined allows a partnership of states to apply. Although, I expect we would choose a lead applicant. And certainly, there is nothing in the statute or in the notice of funding opportunity that prevents a cross border project.

Sarah Bleau

00:54:05.700 --> 00:54:07.950
Yeah, we have to build across state lines right.

Arica Cox

00:54:09.750 --> 00:54:12.150
And there's nothing stopping states from working together, right, to accomplish the mission.

Nick Alexander	00:54:14.820 --> 00:54:15.420 Please do.

Arica Cox
00:54:16.950 --> 00:54:28.020
Alright, so we've got five more minutes and I'm just going to throw it to Sarah and Nick. If you've got any closing remarks, maybe something that wasn't covered previously or something that again, that you want to add to your comments about what you deem important takeaways for this session. And we will get your feedback and begin to wrap this webinar up. Sarah?

Sarah Bleau
00:54:41.700 --> 00:54:49.650
Thank you. I'd like to thank everybody for joining us this afternoon or morning or evening, whatever the time is by you. Middle mile is, it's not the, it's not the big sexy BEAD program, and it's not digital equity, but it is critical in in my mind selfishly. It's one of the most important programs because it gets money out there now and we need middle mile in order to bring high-speed, affordable internet to all Americans. We need middle mile to get the households, to get the communities to the internet. So, thank you. I'm really excited about this program. I can't wait till the application window opens and we can share the application with you and do more webinars to talk through this and help you. But, thank you most of all for being part of this today. Nick?

Arica Cox
00:55:33.930 --> 00:55:44.100
Thanks, Sarah. And we do also have another middle mile webinar scheduled for next Thursday, right? So, do you want to talk a little bit about the content of that one?

Sarah Bleau
00:55:44.670 --> 00:55:45.480
Yeah, I think it's just been kind of a whirlwind lately. Yeah, yes, yes, I, we are doing another webinar one week from today, same time, same place. And my understanding, so we've, I know what the application looks like. You're not going to see it until June 21, but we have, we've developed a checklist. We have an outstanding team that I'm working with who has taken the meat out of the application to say Sarah, go tell everybody what they can begin getting their heads around. So, we're going to share that with you next week. I think that probably next week is more important to call than today.

Arica Cox
00:56:23.910 --> 00:56:24.960
But today was still fun.

Sarah Bleau
00:56:25.020 --> 00:56:25.650
So, thank you.

Arica Cox
00:56:25.950 --> 00:56:30.750
But we're glad everyone's here today, for sure. Nick, any closing remarks?

Nick Alexander	00:56:31.560 --> 00:56:45.990 I'll just say that, so I appreciate all the questions that came in. For the questions that we didn't get to, we're going to go back and take a look at them. And many of them, I think, that you will probably see in a subsequent FAQs or other document. We've got a pretty robust technical assistance process that we're standing up and where we want to make sure that we answer as many questions as possible. I do encourage you to read the notice of funding opportunity. There are some questions in here that are pretty clearly answered within the four corners of the document and so I know it's long and it's clearly, I apologize for that, but that's the way these things work, so.
Sarah Bleau	00:57:11.730 --> 00:57:16.590 I really do want to have a game, though. At the end of this, where we can see who knows more about the FAQs than Nick. Sorry.
Nick Alexander	00:57:22.470 --> 00:57:24.390 Just trying to imagine how that would work. It is a complicated program, but we do have people here, we're going to try and make sure that you have the information and the tools that you need to apply. It's important stuff.
Arica Cox	00:57:39.180 --> 00:57:52.170 Absolutely, so thank you to Doug, to Sarah, and Nick for taking the time out to provide this important information. We want to thank all of you for joining the webinar today, please make sure that you check out the Internet for All website. Also, as Sarah has said, the middlemile@NTIA.gov is the email address to send your questions to. Please, by all means, we'd love to have you back next Thursday for the subsequent middle mile webinar which as Sarah said, is going to contain probably a little bit more detailed and pertinent information. Today was kind of scheduled to be an overview. We'll get into a little bit more detail next week. 00:58:22.500 --> 00:58:35.400 And at the end of the day, we look forward to working with many of you in the future to bring affordable, reliable, high-speed internet to everyone in America. So, please don't hesitate to reach out to us and we hope you have a great day.
Sarah Bleau	00:58:36.960 --> 00:58:37.440 Thank you.
Arica Cox	00:58:38.250 --> 00:58:38.550 Bye. END TRANSCRIPT.