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How Small and Rural Cities Can Boost Grant Funding

Federal funds can help local governments modernize their IT infrastructure for enhanced connectivity.

by **Erin Brereton** ⌕

Erin Brereton has written about technology, business and other topics for more than 50 magazines, newspapers and online publications.

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To take full advantage of online local government services, healthcare and other resources, residents need robust connectivity capabilities — which still aren't available in some areas of the U.S.

As of late 2023, FCC data showed [more than 7.2 million locations](#) lacked high-speed internet access.

An established fiber backbone can enable a fast, reliable connection; yet while 91% of state and local leaders said [their agencies would benefit from modernizing IT infrastructure](#) in a recent EY survey, only 40% identified it as a top priority to be considered today.

[Connectivity-related upgrades](#) may seem particularly out of reach for sparsely populated areas and smaller cities. Fiber providers' deployment efforts have traditionally focused on denser regions where better returns can be realized, due to lower costs per location, according to a [2023 Fiber Broadband Association report](#).

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The expense involved in installing fiber, for instance, can be beyond the scope of local governments' budgets — especially if elements such as rocky terrain, which FBA found can double the cost, are a factor.

Other funding sources, however, may be an option, including federal grants, says Curtiss Strietelmeier, public sector funding manager at CDW.

“The money is there,” Strietelmeier says. “The federal government is investing especially heavily in getting broadband access to areas that do not currently have it.”

Multiple Types of Modernization Assistance Are Being Offered

Some of the federal funding initiatives include the [\\$42.45 billion Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment grant program](#) — established in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law introduced in June 2021 — which supplies financial resources for each state, territory and the District of Columbia to deploy a high-speed internet infrastructure.

The Capital Projects Fund, part of the [American Rescue Plan](#) relief measure Biden signed into law during the COVID-19 pandemic, allotted [\\$10 billion for programs within states](#), territories and tribal governments, including infrastructure updates to facilitate high-speed internet access in rural and remote areas.

“The states distribute that Capital Projects Fund money to providers to encourage them to build out their broadband into rural areas and areas that didn't have infrastructure support,” Strietelmeier says. “The federal government is trying to play a role in building out the infrastructure to these locations to provide the bandwidth they need.”



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Curtiss Strietelmeier, Public Sector Funding Manager, CDW

Local government officials can find information about federal funding opportunities through [Grants.gov](#), run by the Department of Health and Human Services; Strietelmeier also suggests checking state government websites and looking for updates from state agency partners that might be involved in doling out associated money.

“A lot of funding from the federal government gets sent to the states, and then the state distributes the money to the local governments,” he says. “[Reach out to us at CDW](#). We follow all of these things for you. Find a resource who can help you get an idea of what's available and the timelines; for example, this has opened up in March and closes in May, and you won't know if you get funding until October.”

Data Could Maximize the Administration’s Approval Prospects

Applying for a grant may seem daunting if local officials haven't gone through the process before.

Clarifying exactly what they want to do, establishing a plan with annual and other goals, and determining how progress will be measured is a good place to start, according to Strietelmeier.

“Do you have any kind of proof you can refer to, such as, ‘We want to upgrade our cyber infrastructure because we've seen these incidents?’” he says. “Have a way to show that. Because if you don't, when you go to apply for that grant, they're going to ask for it. And then, you're going to be spinning to find that information before the grant window closes.”

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Governments may be able to obtain evidence to support their proposals even if they haven't instituted extensive data management and analysis practices.

“You probably have server logs that are tracking things,” Strietelmeier says. “Or maybe the grant is focused on a certain community type. Look at census data: ‘We are a community of 2,000 people, of which X number is from this population and X number has this education; and given that, we need X amount of support.’ You don't necessarily have to recreate the wheel.”

When meeting with community government professionals, Strietelmeier says he tries to encourage them to consider what overall objectives they hope to work toward in the coming six, 12 or even 18 months.

“You need to have a holistic view of what you're trying to do,” he says. “This is what we're trying to get done this year and a year after; we've got to put in this backbone now so we can put in this system next year.”

Planning ahead will allow government officials in small cities and rural areas to combine local funds with any [federal and state grants they receive](#), potentially giving them a larger pool to draw from and a clearer sense of how to effectively use the funding, Strietelmeier says. It can also help them prepare for future chances to attain financial assistance.

“Most grants repeat every year,” he says. “Even if you didn't get to apply this year, put it in your date book. A lot of times, you can find out who received the money and what their projects were and say, ‘I want to do something similar; that looks like the right grant for me. How do I take advantage of it next year?’”

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


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