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**Blandin Community Broadband Program**

**Program Description and Application Instructions**

**Community Broadband Resources: *Accelerate!***

Issued: August 2, 2021 | Due: October 22, 2021

**Opportunity**

Broadband plays an essential role in the growth of rural Minnesota people and communities. Businesses need it to connect to customers, students need it to participate fully in their education, and we all need it to access information and resources that impact our everyday lives. But the benefits of being connected are not yet shared by all Minnesotans -- and there are a number of reasons why.

To stand alongside Minnesota’s least-served counties and reservations, Blandin Foundation invites eligible communities to apply to an intensive program, **Community Broadband Resources (CBR):** ***Accelerate!***

**Purpose**

To increase rural leaders’ ability to stimulate broadband infrastructure investments in their communities that support economic development and community vitality.

**Program Overview**

Over a four-month timeframe, community leader teams will determine the best path forward to better broadband services in their area through:

* Facilitated weekly meetings
* Leadership education via archived webinars, expert presentations, and peer group discussions
* Information gathering including community surveys, broadband provider interviews, and community meetings
* Step by step broadband planning to:
  + develop a broadband vision
  + understand the local marketplace
  + determine appropriate technologies
  + consider alternative broadband provider partnerships models and prospective broadband provider partners
  + identify and seek available funding resources

Up to six communities will be selected to participate in the cohort II, which is expected to run November through February. Communities will be selected based on the strength of the committed steering team, staff support and level of need.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Application Timeline** | |
| **August 2** | Application period opens |
| **October 22** | Applications due |
| **October 29** | Select and notify cohort II communities |

This virtual program will combine existing online content (webinar and conference recordings), cohort group learning opportunities, and end-of-program community broadband planning consultation. Participating communities will also receive priority for Blandin Foundation’s [Robust Network Feasibility Fund grants](https://blandinfoundation.org/programs/broadband/robust-network-feasibility-fund-grants/) if the community decides that conducting a more detailed planning study is necessary.

*CBR: Accelerate!* can only be effective if a dedicated leadership group commits to working on broadband access through the program. Likewise, feasibility studies have less value if local leaders do not have a plan to understand and follow through on the results. By empowering local leaders with knowledge, information, and a plan, communities will be well positioned to make progress on this significant challenge. The complexity and short time frames of emerging federal and state broadband funding programs makes community preparedness a necessity.

**Eligibility**

Any rural Minnesota community is eligible to apply. A community might be a city, county, school district, township, or any self-defined rural that combines these areas.

**Program Details**

Each community will recruit a team of at least eight members to actively engage in this intensive program. The team should include representatives of government; chambers of commerce; education; health care; and technology companies, including, if desirable, interested existing or prospective Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

***Launch: Orientation Session***

November 5, 9:00-11:00 am, Zoom. The selected communities will gather to discuss each community’s current situation, assets and barriers, possible community roles and hear from Blandin Foundation staff on broadband technology basics.

***Phase One: Leadership Education***

Teams of community members will complete a broadband development curriculum to gain a better understanding of planning processes, technology options, and business and financial models that support successful community broadband development programs. Broadband funding programs will also be highlighted. Leaders commit to watch a set of archived online webinars and participate in weekly follow-up, interactive, cross-community discussions (Fridays from 9 – 11 am). The first hour will be used for education and discussion; the second hour is reserved for each community to discuss the weekly content, review their findings to date, and to plan next steps.

***Phase Two: Information Gathering***

With assistance from Blandin Foundation, each community will review existing broadband maps and interview existing and prospective ISPs to fully understand existing and planned broadband services. To the extent possible, Blandin will provide contact information for providers.

Communities will be required to conduct surveys of local residents, businesses, and key anchor institutions like schools and health care providers. Surveys will also gather speed test data. Communities will be expected to obtain participation of a minimum of 400 survey respondents which would generally ensure a valid sample size.

In collaboration with Minnesota Extension, Blandin staff will provide the survey instrument and participation link. Local sponsors will complete any necessary data entry of printed surveys and be responsible for all costs associated with printing, distribution, and collection of any printed surveys. Communities will have full access to all the survey data. Upon agreement of all parties, prospective ISP partners may be engaged as survey partners.

***Phase 3: Opportunity Analysis and Next Steps***

As a final exercise, Blandin Foundation will facilitate two meetings, one week apart, with each community team to review the collected information and process outcomes. Next steps will be determined, which may include:

1. Proceed to develop a partnership model and finalize project funding with an identified, preferred ISP.
2. Seek provider partners through an RFP process.
3. Proceed to a more formal feasibility study phase with engineering alternatives, pro forma business case development, and partnership identification and formation activities.
4. Hold off on further action.

***Program Closeout: Report to the Community***

Each community will present their findings, strategies, and next steps to the other participating communities for peer review and comment. Community teams should also plan to present their completed work and going forward strategy to an appropriate local audience such as a county or township board, a city council, or economic development authority.

Phases, as detailed above, will overlap as shown in the schedule below:

| **Program Timeline** | **Meetings**  (Friday Cohort Check-ins: 9 - 11am) | **Community Activity** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Week 1**  Nov 5 | **Orientation Meeting** 11/05  Introductions, Broadband 101, full group and community break-out room discussions | Attend orientation meeting |
| **Week 2** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 11/12  Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion | * Watch *Community Broadband Survey* webinar * Create survey plan |
| **Week 3** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 11/19  Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion | * Watch *Broadband Mapping* webinar * Launch Survey w/ Speed Test |
| **Week 4** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 12/03  Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion | * Watch *Setting the Vision* webinar * Map analysis |
| **Week 5** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 12/10  Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion | * Watch *Communicating to Achieve your Broadband Vision* webinar * Interview existing and prospective providers |
| **Week 6** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 12/17  Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion | * Watch *Ownership and Partnership Models* webinar * Finalize community communications plan |
| **Week 7** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 1/07  Ad hoc discussion | * Complete:   + Survey   + map review   + provider interviews   + community communications |
| **Week 8** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 1/14  Ad hoc discussion | * Complete:   + Survey   + map review   + provider interviews   + community communications |
| **Week 9** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 1/21  Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion | * Watch *Feasibility Studies* webinar * Complete:   + Survey   + map review   + provider interviews   + community communications |
| **Week 10** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 1/28  Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion | * Watch *Federal and State Programs* webinar * Complete:   + Survey   + map review   + provider interviews   + community communications |
| **Week 11** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 2/04  Focus on webinar content, ad hoc discussion | * Watch *Local Broadband Finance Options* webinar * Complete:   + Survey   + map review   + provider interviews   + community communications |
| **Week 12** | No cohort meeting | **“What does it all mean?”** planning session |
| **Week 13** | No cohort meeting | **“What do we plan to do?”** planning session |
| **Week 14** | **Friday Cohort Check-in** 2/25  Community Presentations! |  |
| **Week 15** |  | **Community Presentations in Home Community** |

**Application**

Applications are due October 22. Applications should be submitted to Mary Magnuson at [memagnuson@blandinfoundation.org](mailto:memagnuson@blandinfoundation.org). Blandin Foundation will select and notify successful applicants by October 29.

**Team Leader Contact Information:**

Name

Title

Organization

Phone

Email

**Team Members:**

Please list your team members and identify their area affiliations/roles. Please submit their letters of commitment – sample template provided below.

Team Members (Minimum of 8, additional members welcome.)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

**Application Questions:**

1. Who will lead this effort? Who will provide staff support?
2. Please describe any previous broadband planning efforts. What was the result?
3. What affect is the lack of broadband having on your area?
4. Please describe how broadband is a community priority

**Sample Letter of Commitment:**

Dear Bernadine Joselyn,

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the **CBR: Accelerate!.** As [name, affiliation/title, organization], I recognize the importance of improved broadband infrastructure to the future success of my organization and our area. I commit to personally investing several hours per week for approximately fifteen weeks in a concentrated effort to bring better broadband to our area. I also understand that this initial period may only be the beginning of this broadband initiative. After all, if it was easy, it would have been done by now.

[Name]

[Title]

[Date]