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5 winning strategies for improving broadband access through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL)

Top recommendations from Francella Ochillo, Executive Director of Next Century Cities

#1 Understand the problem.

Ensuring that every resident has access to digital opportunities starts with being able to measure the scope of the problem. Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) funding that is filtering through states can be used to support research and outreach initiatives that help state and local officials understand who is and is not connected.

Mayors are uniquely positioned to use their convening power to bring stakeholders together and initiate community asset mapping for broadband. Likewise, states use a variety of methods to collect robust information about regional and community-based needs. Learn more about work in your state here. Lasting connectivity solutions require community-level insights on broadband gaps, affordability challenges, and persistent barriers to adoption.

#2 Get to know your state's broadband office – now.

States are preparing to distribute about $42 billion in broadband funding appropriated through BIL, which could be transformational for your city or town's broadband initiatives. As natural liaisons for local and regional coordination efforts, states are expected to engage in close and ongoing coordination with on-the-ground stakeholders to identify urgent connectivity needs and project eligibility guidelines.

Local governments must apply directly to their state for funding. **Now** is the time to reach out to your state's broadband office to share specifics about your connectivity needs.

#3 Invest in community-driven infrastructure.

For communities where needs assessments and asset mapping identify broadband access and availability as key obstacles, grant-funded infrastructure investments will be critical. In addition to funding via state broadband offices, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's (NTIA) Middle Mile Grant Program (MM) will invest $1 billion into high-capacity digital infrastructure for unserved and underserved communities. Local governments can apply for funding individually or partner with other governments and organizations. **The MM application deadline is September 30, 2022**. USDA, HUD, and the FCC offer additional funding opportunities that communities should consider when developing broadband plans.

#4 Spread the word about BIL's affordable Internet programs.

In many communities where high quality Internet is available, residents continue to struggle with broadband affordability. Oftentimes, price is the greatest barrier for low-income households. The American Connectivity Program (ACP) ensures that low-income households have affordable and reliable Internet access through monthly service discounts. ACP can also help eligible families purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet. By incorporating the ACP into local outreach strategies and ensuring that low-income households learn about their eligibility, local officials can help historically disconnected households get the affordable and reliable service they deserve.

#5 Think big!

Broadband challenges rarely surface in isolation. Cities and towns must tackle connectivity issues as they relate to other policy priorities – like small business development, workforce development, transportation, or health care. Developing long-term broadband solutions that reach and invite collaboration with impacted communities can ensure that broadband programs outlast a mayoral administration while creating digital infrastructure supports other municipal priorities.