



STATE OF VERMONT
GENERAL ASSEMBLY
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND
TECHNOLOGY

MEMORANDUM

To: Representative Kitty Toll, Chair, House Committee on Appropriations
From: Representative Tim Briglin, Chair, House Committee on Energy and Technology
Date: June 8, 2020
Subject: Coronavirus Relief Fund – Energy and Technology Committee Funding Recommendations

The House Committee on Energy and Technology understands that the House Committee on Appropriations is considering proposals related to the allocation of Vermont's share of coronavirus relief funds pursuant to section 601(d) of the Social Security Act, as added by section 5001 of the federal CARES Act.

Never has the need for reliable, affordable, high-speed broadband connectivity been so great. The COVID-19 pandemic and the required social distancing it has engendered have served as an accelerant to the socioeconomic disparities between the connected and the unconnected in our State.

Vermonters who cannot access or cannot afford broadband connectivity, many of whom are geographically isolated, face challenges with respect to distance learning; remote working; accessing telehealth services; participating in government programs and services; and otherwise trying to maintain some form of social connection and civic engagement in these trying times.

It is in this light, that we recommend a [\$XXX] fiscal year 2021 one-time Coronavirus Relief Fund appropriation as an immediate and necessary response to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

We recommend that this [\$XXX] appropriation be allocated as follows:

- (1) [XXX] to the Department of Public Service to be allocated as follows:
 - (A) [\$800,000] to the COVID-Response Connected Community Resilience Program.
 - (B) [\$2,000,000] to the COVID-Response Line Extension Customer Assistance Program.
 - (C) [\$6,000,000] to the Get Vermonters Connected Now Initiative.
 - (D) [\$500,000] to support the COVID-Response Telecommunications Recovery Plan.

(E) [\$XXX] to support the COVID-Response Telehealth and Connectivity Initiative.

(F) [\$XXX] to be disbursed among the State's access media organizations for costs incurred due to unbudgeted and unplanned coverage of public meetings and events in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as for unplanned and unbudgeted expenditures related to critical public health and safety communications concerning the current public health emergency.

(G) [\$30,000,000] to fund ratepayer arrearages as they pertain to utilities affected by the Public Utility Commission's moratorium on utility disconnections issued on March 18, 2020, as further amended and revised by the Commission.

(2) [\$3,000,000] to the Agency of Digital Service to fund efforts to mitigate cybersecurity risks posed by State employees working from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(3) [\$XXX] to the Agency of Digital of Services to support municipal officials in addressing cybersecurity risks and mitigate vulnerabilities posed by closed municipal offices, municipal employees and elected officials working from home, and using teleconferencing platforms as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(4) [\$XXX] to the Enhanced 911 Fund for necessary expenses incurred due to unbudgeted and unplanned critical public health and safety activities and services directly caused by or provided in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

(5) [\$XXX] to the Agency of Education school closures during COVID-19 pandemic, as well as for unbudgeted and unplanned expenditures related to critical public health and safety communications concerning the current public health emergency.

(B) [\$XXX] to Vermont Public Radio for unbudgeted and unplanned expanded educational programming aired in response to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as for unbudgeted and unplanned expenditures related to critical public health and safety communications concerning the current public health emergency.

to be allocated as follows:

(A) [\$XXX] to Vermont Public Broadcasting Service to reimburse costs incurred for unbudgeted and unplanned specialized learning content and other educational programming aired in response to

In addition, to the extent federal guidance deems the following programs and appropriations eligible for CRF funding or additional federal funding is available to the State through subsequent federal legislation, the Committee recommends the following additional appropriations:

(1) [\$1,000,000] to the Department of Labor for the COVID-Response Critical Infrastructure Workforce Training and Incentive Program, which is designed to provide employer grants for workforce expansion in the communications sector to meet the immediate need for broadband construction.

(2) [\$240,000] to the Department of Public Service to fund two new temporary (3 year) positions, COVID-19 rural broadband technical assistance specialists, to assist with the accelerated implementation of broadband deployment projects designed to meet the immediate and critical need for connectivity.

(3) [\$7,000,000] to the Department of Public Service to fund the COVID-Response Engineering and Design Program, a grant program for broadband providers to fund the pre-construction engineering, design, and survey work to bring broadband networks to underserved regions of the State. This program will also support pole-owning utilities in accelerating the processing of pole-attachment applications and license agreements to facilitate critical broadband deployment projects.

(4) [\$45,000,000] to the Department of Public Service to support the COVID-Response Connectivity Initiative, a program designed to provide financing for critical broadband deployment projects in the form of grants, loans, credit enhancements, and letters of credit for projects that will provide all customers in a specified region at least 100 Mbps symmetrical service

Additional details pertaining to the new initiatives and programs itemized above can be found in the accompanying proposed legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on these important matters.