



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 3, 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 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 harrowing if not insurmountable obstacles 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 [**\$100,000,000**] fiscal year 2021 one-time Coronavirus Relief Fund appropriation as an immediate and necessary response to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

All of the broadband solutions recommended here, whether for planning, engineering, infrastructure deployment, or consumer financial assistance, are specifically designed to significantly increase broadband capacity to support distance learning, telehealth services, remote working, and access to online government programs and services during the current COVID-19 public health emergency.

The faster and more thoroughly we react, the sooner and more completely we will recover.

We recommend that this [\$100,000,000] appropriation be allocated as follows:

(1) [\$50,890,000] to the Department of Public Service to be distributed as follows:

(A) [\$240,000] 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;

(B) [\$500,000] to the COVID-Response Connected Community Resilience Program, a grant program for communications union districts that is designed to accelerate implementation of broadband deployment plans;

(C) [\$7,000,000] to the COVID-Response Engineering and Design Program, a grant program for both 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;

(D) [\$2,000,000] to the COVID-Response Line Extension Customer Assistance Program, a grant program to fund customer financial obligations under line extension agreements with Internet service providers;

(E) [\$6,000,000] to the Get Vermonters Connected Initiative, a program to provide financial assistance to low-income Vermonters with respect to obtaining FTTH service drops in fiber-optic networks and for the installation of temporary Wi-Fi hotspots to expand broadband capacity throughout the State;

(F) [\$1,000,000] to support preparation of a revised Telecommunications Plan that reflects the State's connectivity needs in light of the COVID-19 public health emergency;

(G) [\$150,000] to the COVID-Response Digital Literacy for Seniors Program to fund outreach and educational programs designed to improve the digital literacy skills of seniors;

(H) [\$1,000,000] to the Vermont Public Broadcasting Service to reimburse costs incurred for unbudgeted and unplanned specialized learning content and other educational programming aired in response to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic;

(I) [\$1,000,000] to Vermont Public Radio for unbudgeted and unplanned expanded educational programming aired in response to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic;

(J) [\$2,000,000] to be disbursed among the State's 25 (PEG) access media organizations for costs incurred due to unbudgeted and unplanned coverage of municipal and school board meetings in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and

(K) [\$30,000,000] for financial assistance to electric ratepayers unable to pay their utility bills as a result of economic hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which will alleviate individual financial hardships and potential credit-rating downgrades, while simultaneously reducing the future need for electric rate increases.

(2) [\$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.

(3) [\$44,860,000] to 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;

(4) [\$3,000,000] to the Agency of Digital Service to fund a COVID-19 cybersecurity assessment for the State on a system by system basis to mitigate cybersecurity risks posed by State employees working from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(5) [\$250,000] to the Enhanced 911 Fund for unbudgeted, necessary expenses incurred due to the COVID-19 public health emergency.

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

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