



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 10, 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 **\$43,268,500** fiscal year 2021 one-time Coronavirus Relief Fund appropriation as an immediate and necessary response to the COVID-19 public health emergency. These are our Tier I recommendations.

We recommend that this appropriation be allocated as follows:

- (1) \$35,566,500 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) \$11,000,000 to the Get Vermonters Connected Now Initiative.
 - (D) \$500,000 to support the COVID-Response Telecommunications Recovery Plan.

(E) \$800,000 to support the COVID-Response Telehealth and Connectivity Initiative.

(F) \$466,500 to be disbursed, in consultation with the Vermont Access Network, among the State's access media organizations for staffing and operational 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 increased production and technical support for live-streaming government and community-based organizations.

(G) \$20,000,000 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 Services to fund efforts to mitigate cybersecurity risks posed by State employees working from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(3) \$4,000,000 to the Agency of Digital Services to reimburse costs incurred for unbudgeted and unplanned expenditures for the purpose of Unemployment Insurance Claims Modernization. It is the intent of the General Assembly to increase Vermonter's access to unemployment insurance claims services in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency through a modernization move to a technical solution that ensures seamless access for citizens throughout Vermont.

(4) \$350,000 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.

(5) \$152,000 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.

(6) \$200,000 to the Agency of Education to be allocated as follows:

(A) \$100,000 to 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.

(B) \$100,000 to Vermont Public Radio for unbudgeted and unplanned expanded educational programming aired in response to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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, Tier II 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.
- (5) \$4,000,000 to the Agency of Digital Services to reimburse costs incurred for unbudgeted and unplanned expenditures for the purpose of workforce management modernization to support a remote workforce due to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has driven a distinct change in how the State workforce delivers programs to Vermonters. As many are working from home this will lead to a shift long-term in the dynamics of the State workforce and the technology required to manage it effectively.

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.