

Public Service CRF Programs

Act 137, Section 13 of the act appropriated \$17,433,500.00¹ to the Department of Public Service to rapidly increase broadband connectivity consistent with federal parameters and the State's broadband goal of 100Mbps symmetrical service and provide economic support to Vermonters adversely affected by the COVID-19 emergency. Several Department programs were created or funded as a result of this legislation.

- (1) The Line Extension Customer Assistance Program.
- (2) The Get Vermonters Connected Now Initiative
- (3) The COVID-Response Temporary Broadband Lifeline Program
- (4) Additional funding for the existing Connectivity Initiative established under 30 V.S.A. § 7515b (for projects that can be completed consistent with the parameters of Coronavirus Relief Fund eligible expenditures).
- (5) Wi-Fi Hot Spot Project

Section 14 of the act appropriated \$800,000 for the Connected Community Resiliency Program.² Section 15 appropriated \$500,000 for the COVID Response Telecommunications Plan. Section 18 appropriated \$466,500 to the PEG TV stations for COVID related expenses.

Line Extension Customer Assistance Program “LECAP”

Section 13b of H.966 allocated up to \$2,000,000 to the purpose of providing financial assistance to consumers for costs associated with line extensions to unserved locations. The program incorporated PUC Cable Rule 8.313 to subsidize the consumer portion of a cable or participating internet service provider (“ISP”) line extension. LECAP has helped hundreds of Vermonters who meet the following criteria: lack 25/3 internet service, live near a broadband provider network, and have a COVID-19 related need. The program offered qualified consumers up to \$3000 of financial support. The program consisted of two phases. Phase one made payments on behalf of the consumer directly to service providers. Eliminating or lowering consumer out-of-pocket costs. Phase two offered reimbursement to consumers who purchased a qualified line extension outside the phase one program parameters.

The program received 400+ applications and awarded 260 consumer grants totaling **\$545,000.00**. The most popular way to utilize the funding was through a neighborhood approach. Neighbors were encouraged and empowered to form groups and maximize their purchasing power. This community approach, guided by the Department, reduced overall line extension costs and helped maximize the number of consumers who could be served by a single project.

The program was very popular. Hundreds of applications were received during the first weeks of phase one rollout. But the program was not without its limits. Service provider participation was voluntary. Six Vermont telecommunication providers chose to participate in the program. Several factors limited the effectiveness of the program. Federal spending limitations only

¹ This appropriation was reduced by \$500,000 for water/waste water arrearage program.

² This appropriation was increased to \$2,300,000 pursuant to Act 154.

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allowed funding projects through December 2020. Unpredictable issues, such as workforce constraints, make-ready issues, and seasonal/weather-related concerns also impacted the program. With an expanded time frame the program could have helped nearly all the applicants.

The Get Vermonters Connected Now Initiative

In response to the COVID-19 public health crisis, the Vermont Legislature established the Get Vermonters Connected Now Initiative (GVCNI). The grant program, offered to applicants through the same RFP as the COVID-19 Emergency Connectivity Initiative, provides financial assistance to Internet Service Providers to offset the customer costs of fiber-to-the-premises installations, which include underground conduit installations, where required, and service drops.

The Department prioritized projects involving the installation of underground conduit, where required, that would result in broadband access to low-income households with remote learning, telehealth, and telework needs. Several Connectivity Initiative awardees leveraged the GVCNI to offset the customer costs of trenching fiber between the pole and the residence.

The COVID-19 Connectivity Initiative

In legislation authorizing the Emergency Connectivity Initiative the PSD was directed to identify and prioritize certain locations. These include locations where K-12 students reside, and locations identified as needing broadband for telehealth or telework requirements.

In preparation for the program, the PSD canvassed all Vermont K-12 schools. The PSD obtained thousands of addresses and after significant effort in matching the addresses ultimately identified 27,432 unique locations. In addition, the PSD conducted an online survey on its website to collect locations where residents reported that broadband was necessary for telehealth or telework requirements. Of these locations, PSD staff identified 7,402 locations that the broadband deployment data indicated lacked 25/3 Mbps service and posted these locations along with the eligible locations with the RFP. Proposals that pledged to serve these priority locations were allocated additional merit according to the RFP score sheet.

The Department made available \$12 Million in grant funds, which were distributed in three funding rounds- starting with an RFP advertised in July 2020. The Department received and reviewed an unprecedented number of proposal packages from applicants, which was unsurprising as the available funding was far greater than in any prior offering of the Connectivity Initiative.

A summary table below lists the award amounts and number of locations at which the Department will require grantees to offer 25/3 broadband service. Some grantees are listed more than once in the table due to receiving multiple awards and signing multiple agreements. Wireless and DSL providers are provided to provide speed tests as part of their certification process in grant closeout. Grantees will forfeit funding on a pro-rata basis for locations that cannot achieve 25/3 bandwidth. If a grantee cannot meet required speeds for more than 15% of awarded locations, their grant may be subject to forfeiture. Press releases announcing awards, tables of grant locations, and interactive map of awarded locations are available on the

Department’s website³. Locations in the Department’s maps and tables are not final until all awardees have completed their construction, speed testing, and certifications.

COVID-19 Response Connectivity Initiative

Awardee	Technology	Award	Eligible Locations
MCFiber	FTTP	\$ 311,561.38	598
NEW Alliance	Fixed Wireless	\$ 171,770.00	632
VTel	Fixed Wireless	\$ 2,240,250.00	3889
Duncan	FTTP	\$ 37,631.00	22
Comcast	Cable	\$ 152,500.00	77
ECFiber	FTTP	\$ 1,117,570.00	397
WCVT	FTTP	\$ 112,453.00	26
Charter	Cable	\$ 142,939.00	117
Tilson	FTTP	\$ 3,731,725.00	577
Wireless Partners	Fixed Wireless	\$ 762,662.00	668
ECFiber	FTTP	\$ 502,000.00	232
Franklin	FTTP	\$ 45,691.00	24
WCVT	FTTP	\$ 489,626.00	131
NEW Co	Fixed Wireless	\$ 381,611.00	1369
Cloud Alliance	Fixed Wireless	\$ 384,094.00	512
Topsham	FTTP	\$ 971,242.50	55 ⁴
WCVT	FTTP	\$ 590,004.00	155
Duncan split	FTTP	\$ 18,976.00	13
		Totals	
		\$ 12,164,305.88	9439
	Fiber	\$ 7,928,479.88	2175
	Cable	\$ 295,439.00	194
	Fixed Wireless	\$ 3,940,387.00	7070

The COVID-Response Temporary Broadband Subsidy Program

Pursuant to H.966, the Department initiated the Temporary Broadband Subsidy Program. The program was available to Vermont residents who faced economic hardship due to the COVID-19

³ <https://publicservice.vermont.gov/content/2020-connectivity-initiative-awards>

⁴ The awardee in this case will be building fiber that will pass, and is capable of serving, approximately 350 underserved locations. Grantee was hesitant to undertake a full build on such a short deadline, and instead opted to ensure they could make serviceable drops to the 55 locations in their agreement. The overlapping Communications Union District stated support for this project, as it will build a significant amount of fiber that will be put into use in 2021.

Emergency and needed internet service for remote work, remote learning, or telehealth. The program provided \$40 per month credits to eligible applicants for the period of March 1 – December 30, 2020. The program issued a total of **\$920,712** to 2,935 applicants. In December, Congress set appropriated \$3.2 billion to a national broadband subsidy program for the same purpose.

COVID-Response Connected Community Resilience Program

The COVID-Response Connected Community Resilience Program provided communications union districts with funds for recovery planning. Communications union districts were awarded \$1,392,802 in grants. The Communications union districts funded short-term connectivity solutions, outreach and communication efforts, and the provision of administrative, legal and project management support.

COVID- Response Connected Community Resilience Program

Communications Union District	Award
Southern Vermont/Catamount Fiber	\$100,000.00
Addison County/Maple Fiber	\$130,000.00
Otter Creek	\$109,215.00
Northwest Communications Union District	\$31,667.00
Lamoille FiberNet	\$121,760.00
NEK Community Broadband	\$560,000.00
CV Fiber	\$240,160.00
Deerfield Valley	\$100,000.00
Total	\$1,392,802.00

Wi-Fi Hot Spots

Prior to the widespread closure of facilities due to the COVID-19 outbreak, medical providers and their patients and students and their teachers customarily met in person in offices and classrooms. COVID-19 and social distancing requirements have necessitated telehealth consultations and remote learning that, under non-pandemic circumstances, could have been conducted – if necessary and unavailable at home – via internet connections inside a library, coffee shop, or other public internet access point. The need for ubiquitous access to high-speed internet connections for healthcare, education, and government services has grown exponentially while existing public access points have become suddenly unavailable due to social distancing requirements.

PSD staff identified the locations of all schools, libraries, and town halls, and plotted these on an interactive map on the PSD website. The PSD contacted the administrators at each of these locations to determine whether WiFi was available to the public. When information was received the map was updated to include the current status. The PSD also collected information on other facilities, such as restaurants, gas stations and country stores where WiFi was available and added this to the map.

The Vermont Department of Public Service addressed this emergency gap by contracting for the rapid installation of commercial-grade outdoor Wireless Access Points at 190 sites around the state of Vermont

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that are accessible by vehicle in order to facilitate this emergency provision of adequate wireless internet and Wi-Fi calling services for telehealth, contact tracing, distance learning, e-government, remote working, and other COVID-19-related needs. Hot Spots were installed at town offices, libraries, other community gathering spaces, affordable housing, and motels housing displaced families.

Other Items

The Department spent \$475,000 on the COVID Response Telecommunications Plan.⁵ The Department will expend the entirety of the PEG Fund, or \$466,500.

⁵ The Plan can be accessed at <https://publicservice.vermont.gov/content/covid-response-telecommunications-recovery-plan>