

RURAL LAST-MILE BROADBAND AND WORKFORCE HUBS ACT SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the “Rural Last-Mile Broadband and Workforce Hubs Act”.

SEC. 2. FINDINGS. Congress finds the following:

1. Access to affordable, reliable, high-speed broadband is essential for full participation in the economy, education, healthcare, and civic life.
2. Significant portions of rural America, including counties within Indiana’s Ninth Congressional District, remain unserved or underserved by high-speed broadband.
3. Workforce shortages in broadband construction, maintenance, and technology integration impede deployment and adoption.
4. Federal investment in broadband infrastructure must be accompanied by enforceable milestones, public transparency, and clawback provisions to ensure timely and effective use of funds.
5. Harmonization with existing programs such as the Federal Communications Commission’s E-Rate program and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration’s Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program will maximize efficiency and avoid duplication.

SEC. 3. DEFINITIONS. For purposes of this Act:

1. **Broadband** — A terrestrial, fixed, or fixed-wireless service providing:
 - a. A minimum download speed of 100 megabits per second and upload speed of 20 megabits per second; and
 - b. Latency sufficient to support real-time, interactive applications.
2. **Last-Mile Infrastructure** — The segment of a broadband network that connects the network to the end-user premises.
3. **Middle-Mile Infrastructure** — The segment of a broadband network that connects local access points to the core network.
4. **Rural Area** — Has the meaning given in section 343(a) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act (7 U.S.C. 1991(a)), except that the Secretary may designate additional areas as rural for purposes of this Act based on lack of broadband service.
5. **Workforce Hub** — A physical facility located in a rural or underserved area that:
 - a. Provides training, certification, and apprenticeship programs in broadband deployment, maintenance, and related technology fields; and
 - b. Is accessible to the public and operated in partnership with local educational institutions or workforce boards.
6. **Eligible Entity** — Includes:
 - a. A State, unit of local government, Tribal government, or political subdivision thereof;
 - b. A nonprofit organization;

- c. A cooperative, including a broadband or electric cooperative;
 - d. A private broadband service provider; or
 - e. A public-private partnership comprised of any combination of the above.
7. **Secretary** — The Secretary of Commerce, acting through the Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information.
8. **Public Dashboard** — An online, publicly accessible platform that displays project-level data as described in Section 9.

SEC. 4. ELIGIBILITY FOR ASSISTANCE.

(a) **In General.** — The Secretary may award grants under this Act to eligible entities for the purposes of:

- 1. Planning, constructing, acquiring, or leasing last-mile broadband infrastructure in rural or underserved areas;
- 2. Establishing and operating workforce hubs; and
- 3. Associated activities necessary to achieve universal broadband access and adoption in the project area.

(b) **Partnerships.** — An eligible entity may apply individually or as part of a public-private partnership, provided that:

- 1. The partnership agreement specifies roles, responsibilities, and cost-sharing arrangements; and
- 2. All partners agree to the transparency and reporting requirements of this Act.

(c) **Priority.** — In awarding grants, the Secretary shall give priority to projects that:

- 1. Serve the highest percentage of unserved households;
- 2. Leverage existing middle-mile infrastructure;
- 3. Include commitments for open-access spillover capacity to local ISPs at cost; and
- 4. Integrate workforce training and apprenticeship programs with broadband deployment.

SEC. 5. FEDERAL SHARE AND MATCHING REQUIREMENTS.

(a) **Federal Share.** — Except as provided in subsection (b), the Federal share of the cost of a project carried out with a grant under this Act shall not exceed 75 percent.

(b) **High-Need Areas.** — For projects serving counties in which:

- 1. The median household income is less than 80 percent of the national median; and
- 2. Broadband service availability is less than 25 percent of households, the Federal share may be up to 90 percent.

(c) **Matching Funds.** — The non-Federal share may be provided in cash or in-kind contributions, including:

- 1. Rights-of-way;

2. Access to poles, ducts, conduits, or other infrastructure;
3. Provision of materials or equipment; and
4. Documented volunteer labor for eligible construction or installation activities.

(d) **Formula.** — The Secretary shall establish a matching formula that:

1. Scales the required non-Federal share based on the relative cost per household served;
2. Incentivizes cost-efficient designs; and
3. Rewards integration of workforce training and local hiring commitments.

SEC. 6. COORDINATION WITH EXISTING PROGRAMS.

(a) **E-Rate.** — The Secretary shall coordinate with the Federal Communications Commission to ensure that projects serving schools and libraries are aligned with and complementary to the E-Rate program under section 254(h) of the Communications Act of 1934 (47 U.S.C. 254(h)).

(b) **BEAD Program.** — The Secretary shall ensure that projects funded under this Act are harmonized with the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program established under section 60102 of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (47 U.S.C. 1702), including:

1. Avoiding duplication of funding;
2. Aligning reporting requirements where practicable; and
3. Sharing mapping and performance data.

(c) **Other Programs.** — The Secretary shall coordinate with the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Education, and other relevant Federal agencies to maximize the impact of Federal broadband investments.

SEC. 7. MILESTONES AND PERFORMANCE REQUIREMENTS. (a) **Project Schedule.** — Each grant recipient shall submit, as part of its application, a detailed project schedule including:

1. Engineering and design completion dates;
2. Construction start and completion dates;
3. Service activation dates for each service area; and
4. Workforce hub operational start date, if applicable.

(b) **Mandatory Milestones.** — At a minimum, each project shall:

1. Commence construction within 12 months of grant award;
2. Achieve 50 percent of planned service connections within 24 months;
3. Achieve 100 percent of planned service connections within 36 months; and
4. For workforce hubs, enroll the first cohort of trainees within 6 months of facility readiness.

(c) **Progress Reports.** — Recipients shall submit quarterly progress reports to the Secretary, including:

1. Percentage of construction completed;
2. Number of premises passed and connected;
3. Workforce hub enrollment and completion statistics; and
4. Any delays, causes, and mitigation measures.

SEC. 8. CLAWBACKS AND PENALTIES.

(a) **Failure to Meet Milestones.** — If a recipient fails to meet any mandatory milestone without good cause, the Secretary shall:

1. Withhold future disbursements until compliance is achieved; and
2. Require repayment of a proportional share of funds corresponding to the unmet portion of the project.

(b) **Misuse of Funds.** — Any funds used for purposes other than those approved in the grant agreement shall be repaid in full, with interest, and the recipient shall be ineligible for new awards under this Act for a period of 5 years.

(c) **Persistent Non-Compliance.** — If a recipient fails to achieve full project completion within 48 months of award, the Secretary shall:

1. Recover all unspent funds;
2. Recover a proportional share of spent funds based on the percentage of unserved premises remaining; and
3. Publish the non-compliance on the public dashboard.

SEC. 9. ENFORCEMENT. (a) **Audit Authority.** — The Secretary, the Inspector General of the Department of Commerce, and the Comptroller General of the United States shall have authority to audit any project funded under this Act.

(b) **Public Accountability.** — All enforcement actions, including clawbacks, penalties, and compliance determinations, shall be posted on the public dashboard within 30 days of issuance.

(c) **Judicial Enforcement.** — The Attorney General may bring a civil action in United States district court to enforce the provisions of this Act or recover funds owed to the United States.

SEC. 10. PUBLIC DASHBOARD AND TRANSPARENCY REQUIREMENTS.

(a) **Establishment.** — The Secretary shall establish and maintain, or require each grant recipient to establish and maintain, a publicly accessible online dashboard for each project funded under this Act.

(b) **Minimum Data Elements.** — Each public dashboard shall display, at a minimum, the following information, updated quarterly:

1. **Project Identification:**
 - a. Project name and unique identifier;

- b. Name(s) of grant recipient(s) and partners;
- c. Total project cost, Federal share, and non-Federal share.

2. Geographic Scope:

- a. Map of the project area, including county and census block boundaries;
- b. Identification of unserved and underserved areas targeted.

3. Deployment Metrics:

- a. Miles of fiber or other last-mile infrastructure constructed to date;
- b. Number of premises passed;
- c. Number of premises connected and activated;
- d. Average and median speeds delivered;
- e. Latency performance.

4. Workforce Hub Metrics (if applicable):

- a. Date hub became operational;
- b. Number of trainees enrolled, in progress, and completed;
- c. Certifications awarded;
- d. Job placements within 6 months of completion.

5. Financial Reporting:

- a. Federal funds expended to date;
- b. Non-Federal match expended to date;
- c. Itemized major cost categories.

6. Milestone Tracking:

- a. Original milestone schedule;
- b. Current status against each milestone;
- c. Explanations for any delays and corrective actions.

7. Open-Access Commitments:

- a. Availability of spillover capacity to local ISPs;
- b. Terms and pricing for access;
- c. Number of ISPs utilizing open-access capacity.

8. Compliance and Enforcement:

- a. Notices of non-compliance;
- b. Clawbacks or penalties imposed;
- c. Audit summaries.

(c) Data Standards. — All dashboard data shall be:

- 1. Machine-readable and exportable in open formats;
- 2. Accessible to individuals with disabilities; and
- 3. Maintained in a manner that protects personally identifiable information of subscribers.

(d) **Integration.** — The Secretary shall integrate dashboard data into the National Broadband Map and other relevant Federal broadband data platforms to ensure consistency and public accessibility.

(e) **Verification.** — Dashboard data shall be subject to independent verification by an auditor approved by the Secretary at least annually.