Agenda Item 7.2

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TO: **RAILS Board Consortia Committee**

FROM: **Anne Slaughter**

SUBJECT: **Updates on Broadband Expansion and Digital Equity**

This update is a snapshot of the status and available information as of the time of writing. This area is subject to rapid evolution and frequent developments, and I advise seeking current information on these programs and topics when conducting any follow-up or sharing with other groups in subsequent weeks. Any potential impacts to these programs because of changes at the federal government level are speculative and unknown at the time of writing, and the established processes under the public acts defining the programs have continued to progress.

Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD)/Connect Illinois Projects and Mapping

Broadband infrastructure expansion projects are awarded to internet service providers (ISPs) under the Connect Illinois program (https://dceo.illinois.gov/broadband/connect-il-bead.html). Projects in rounds 1-3 have been awarded with state funding and some projects have begun. Continuing rounds of Connect Illinois awards will be covered by the federal BEAD funding awarded to Illinois. The Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for Round 4, representing the first wave of BEAD, is rolling out at the time of writing.

A critical aspect of the preparation for BEAD funding has been to ensure that broadband access across Illinois is accurately mapped and unserved/underserved locations are correctly identified as eligible to be connected through BEAD projects. The Illinois Office of Broadband (IOB) maintains two mapping tools which can be found at https://illinois-broadband-cngis.hub.arcgis.com/, with a handful of how-to webinars at https://dceo.illinois.gov/broadband/previous-webinars.html. The Project Area Selection Tool identifies hexagonal areas containing eligible locations that will then be selected by ISPs applying for Connect Illinois/BEAD funding, and provides an easy way to see the eligibility status of specific residences and community anchor institutions. The Illinois Broadband Map contains an abundance of layers, several of which are also particularly useful to libraries in viewing the impact of these programs to their own institutions and the communities they serve:

- Library service areas are available in the "Boundaries" section, in addition to legislative districts, census blocks, counties and other municipalities, school districts, and many more.
- Building locations for libraries can be found in the "Community Anchor Institutions" section.
- The "Connect Illinois Grant Rounds" layer in the "State Programs" section displays areas covered by projects awarded in rounds 1-3.
- Several sections displaying various aspects of Access (speed, technology, provider, etc.) are available.

Libraries are encouraged to use these tools to view and track projects in their areas, and to engage with ISPs seeking to gather evidence of community coordination and support for their funding applications.

The IOB has published a [guidance document](#) (PDF) describing the requirements and ways to engage that will be helpful to libraries that may be approached as a part of this process.

Digital Equity Act Competitive Grants

In addition to funding each individual state, territory, and tribal organization, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) is operating a $1.25 billion competitive program awarding funds directly to large ($5-$12 million range) projects from a wider scope of eligible organizations, including libraries, supporting various areas of technology access and skill development. Two announcements of awarded projects have been made, with an expectation of more to come. These announcements can be found at https://broadbandusa.ntia.gov/news/latest-news. Illinois will benefit from two of the projects covering multi-state areas awarded thus far. The American Library Association applied, as did several Illinois-based organizations, with no known award status updates at the time of writing.

Illinois Digital Equity Capacity Grant

NTIA has [approved and recommended for funding](#) Illinois' $23+ million expected award, with payment expected after additional documentation is submitted and reviewed. Upon final approval, they will announce the Illinois Digital Equity Capacity Grant program (https://dceo.illinois.gov/broadband/illinois-digital-equity-capacity-grant.html), which will make subgrants of the majority of the federal funding award not being used for the IOB's own programming and operations. Libraries will be eligible to apply, with NOFO release expected in the coming weeks, and a [series of webinars](#) providing guidance to prospective applicants has been announced. IOB also provides its general plan, implementation information, and several resources at https://dceo.illinois.gov/broadband/digital-equity-act.html, including the finalized Digital Equity Plan reflecting many of the changes jointly requested by RAILS, IHLS, and CARLI during the public comment period.

RAILS Projects

Current RAILS projects and partnerships include:

Statewide and Municipal Collaboration

- An ongoing partnership with IHLS and CARLI to combine efforts on library awareness-building and representation of the statewide Illinois library community. We are currently working on preliminary steps to outline a project and prepare to apply for an Illinois Digital Equity Capacity Grant focused on public libraries' wide spectrum of capacity needs at the intersection of their services and the more broadly scoped digital navigator role as defined by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance at https://www.digitalinclusion.org/digitalnavigatormodel/.
- An upcoming project with a municipal partner to support library digital navigation services.

Library Community Support

- The RAILS Digital Equity Networking Group was formed last summer by Todd Miller from Niles-Maine District Library with RAILS staff support and is open to all Illinois library workers. Meeting and listserv information: https://railslibraries.org/networking/groups/113376.
- Ongoing updates via our e-news and Broadband and Digital Equity Pulse page: https://railslibraries.org/broadband (content suggestions are welcome).

Legislative Advocacy

- As part of our ongoing efforts to advocate for expedited connection of libraries that are unserved or underserved by broadband, with the support of the Illinois Library Association, RAILS is closely watching the newly introduced HB 1062 which provides that the Illinois Century Network (ICN) Act shall prioritize the connection of anchor institutions according to the type of institution, starting with schools and libraries. Bill status: https://ilga.gov/legislation/BillStatus.asp?DocNum=1062&GAID=18&DocTypeID=HB&LegId=157078&SessionID=114&GA=104.

Recent Funding to Libraries

Some RAILS libraries have recently received funding for digital inclusion activities under several programs. These awards do not represent the only opportunities for funding or all libraries that have been supported by past programs; libraries are encouraged to watch their counties, local or regional digital equity coalitions, foundations or giving programs through locally based corporations or ISPs such as Comcast, library associations, and other organizations supporting digital equity.

Public Library Association Digital Literacy Incentives

This annual program helps libraries support digital skill development in their communities through workshops or digital navigator services. Libraries can find updates on past awards and upcoming deadlines at: https://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/digitalliteracy. 2024 RAILS member library awardees:

- Broadview Public Library District
- Gail Borden Public Library District (Elgin)
- Robert R. Jones Public Library (Coal Valley)
- Chillicothe Public Library
- Highwood Public Library
- North Riverside Public Library

Cook County Digital Equity IMPACT Grants

Cook County consistently works to ensure library representation in their digital equity advisory bodies and programming efforts. This program offered by the Digital Equity unit of the Cook County Office of the President supports Suburban Cook County organizations that implement digital equity activities, with projects focused on storytelling. More information at https://www.cookcountyil.gov/service/digital-equity. Library awardees:

- Forest Park Public Library (partnered with Growing Community Media and Wright to Learn)
- Markham Public Library
- Niles-Maine District Library
- North Riverside Public Library

Waukegan Telehealth Booth

Waukegan Public Library (WPL) has installed a new Telehealth Booth, provided with support from Abbott Fund. The booth is the first library-based telehealth service in the Chicagoland area, offering a quiet, private and ADA-accessible space for library patrons to connect with their

preferred healthcare providers and attend health appointments virtually. WPL has also been heavily involved with the burgeoning Lake County Digital Equity coalition.

Universal Service Fund (USF) and E-rate

In conversations about broadband in relation to schools and libraries, the E-rate program is often discussed as synonymous with affordability. The U.S. Supreme Court is currently set to review two consolidated cases challenging the constitutionality of the Universal Service Fund, of which E-rate is a part. The Schools, Health, & Libraries Broadband Coalition (SHLB) and American Library Association (ALA) Policy Office have been deeply engaged in advocacy around this issue, including leadership in filing amicus briefs.

- Amicus brief from ALA, with SHLB: https://www.ala.org/news/2025/01/ala-files-us-supreme-court-amicus-brief-affirming-universal-service-e-rate-program
- Amicus brief from SHLB, with the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), and MediaJustice: https://www.shlb.org/blogs/shlb-benton-ndia-and-mediajustice-defend-universal-service-fund-in-supreme-court
- Op-ed from ALA President Cindy Hohl: https://www.pressherald.com/2025/01/17/opinion-e-rate-is-a-lifeline-for-maine-libraries-like-mine/

Resources

Many organizations are working locally and nationally on different aspects of broadband and digital equity advocacy, programming, funding, coalitions, and more. Key resources worth following:

- American Library Association (ALA) resources: https://www.ala.org/advocacy/broadband/digital-equity-resources
- Benton Institute for Broadband and Society: https://www.benton.org/
- Illinois Broadband Lab (IBL): https://broadband.uillinois.edu/
- Illinois Office of Broadband (IOB):
  - Website: https://dceo.illinois.gov/broadband.html
  - General weekly newsletter: https://illinois.us17.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=977be54447f66cf16e0c961f3&id=10c33722e1
  - Tailored news updates: https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/38288926309a4b4e95df73f3b48a4c21
- Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) broadband priority area and awarded grants: https://www.imls.gov/about/learn-about-imls/priority-areas/broadband
- National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA): https://www.digitalinclusion.org/
- National Skills Coalition (NSC): https://nationalskillscoalition.org/digital-equity-at-work/
- National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA):
  - BroadbandUSA website: https://broadbandusa.ntia.gov/
  - Newsletter: https://ntiacrmgrants.my.site.com/broadbandusanewsletter/s/
- Public Library Association (PLA) resources: https://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/digitalliteracy
- The work of Colin Rhinesmith, UIUC School of Information Sciences faculty:
  - Digital Equity Action Research Laboratory: https://publish.illinois.edu/digitalequity/
  - Digital Equity Research Center: https://dercenter.org/
- Schools, Health, & Libraries Broadband Coalition (SHLB): https://www.shlb.org/