

ANNUAL REPORT

OFFICE OF BROADBANDOHIO



2023 OSU Farm Science Review in London

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**Department of
Development**

BroadbandOhio

A Message from Director Lydia Mihalik



At the Ohio Department of Development, our mission is simple:

We empower communities to succeed. But it's more than a slogan; it's a philosophy we live by every day. BroadbandOhio exemplifies this commitment to improving the lives of all Ohioans.

It's been more than three years since BroadbandOhio was created to support Governor DeWine and Lt. Governor Husted's vision of bringing affordable, high-speed internet to every community. Since then, BroadbandOhio has invested nearly \$250 million to connect 135,000 homes across the state through the Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Grant Program.

Through a new pole replacement and undergrounding program, \$50 million was made available this year to internet service providers to help cover infrastructure costs.

In addition, through other programs announced this year, more than 90 percent of residents in Darke County will receive improved internet coverage, Ohio State received funding that supports an autonomous farming equipment project, and Butler County students living in a mobile home community received free internet access through a state-funded grant that will provide connectivity for three years. These are just examples of how BroadbandOhio is transforming the lives of communities throughout Ohio.

This report highlights these achievements and outlines our plans to continue to connect Ohioans to reliable, high-speed internet. Through programs such as the Affordability Grant, which will bring internet service to those in areas of the state with low adoption rates, and the Student Connectivity Grant, which will work to meet the needs of students in unserved and underserved communities, BroadbandOhio's tireless efforts to serve all Ohioans will continue.

I couldn't be prouder of what our team accomplished in 2023, and I can't wait to see how BroadbandOhio can impact lives in 2024 and the years to come.

Respectfully,

Lydia Mihalik

A handwritten signature of Lydia Mihalik in blue ink, written in a cursive style.

Director, Ohio Department of Development



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Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Grant

The Ohio Residential Broadband Expansion Grant (ORBEG), first enacted in House Bill 2 of the 134th General Assembly, was designed to bring high-speed internet to unserved areas in Ohio. As part of the first round of ORBEG, 33 grant agreements were signed and initial payments were processed in 2022, totaling \$67 million. In 2023, numerous grantees hit their second and third milestones. BroadbandOhio continues to hold monthly calls with the grantees to provide office updates to the grantees as well as receive updates on the status of their grant projects and answer any questions they might have. All grantees have submitted all four of their quarter reports in addition to their year-end reports.

On October 4, 2023, the Ohio Broadband Expansion Program Authority approved the second round of ORBEG. The application was posted on October 6, with the application submission period beginning on November 6, and ending January 5, 2024. Funds from the US Department of Treasury Capital Projects Funds (CPF) will be used to expand the current state-funded program to serve additional locations. Prior to the Authority approving the second round, HB33 made changes to the program that also were accepted by the Authority.

The second round of the ORBEG program was designed to provide Ohio households with internet service at speeds of 100/100 Mbps upon project completion. Internet service providers utilizing investments funded by the CPF will be required to participate in the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) – a \$30 per month subsidy for low-income families.

BEAD Five-Year Action Plan

In June, the Ohio Department of Development announced it received a historic \$793 million in federal funding through the U.S. Department of Commerce's Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program, creating an opportunity for more Ohioans to receive affordable, high-speed internet.

Since this announcement, BroadbandOhio has completed and submitted the BEAD Five-year Action Plan, which detailed the program's high-level goals and how Ohio will engage with stakeholders throughout the process.

The next requirement to receive funding after the Five-Year Action Plan was submitted is the initial proposal, which comes in two volumes. BroadbandOhio has submitted Volume I, which consists of a large amount of data required by the NTIA and, more importantly, outlined Ohio's challenge process. Volume II was posted for public comment October 20, 2023 and consists of the steps that will be taken to run the sub-grantee selection process. The ORBEG program is the foundation of the process, and Ohio will adopt federal guidelines where necessary. Both volumes must be completed by December 31, 2023.



BroadbandOhio Digital Opportunity Summit

Digital Opportunity Summit

On February 16, 2023, BroadbandOhio and the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) co-hosted a sold-out, statewide event to kickstart Ohio’s digital opportunity planning process and learn more about local, state, and national efforts to close the digital divide for all Ohioans. The Digital Opportunity Summit celebrated the ways digital inclusion champions are empowering Ohioans to fully engage in their communities, seek and maintain employment, better connect with loved ones, learn, and access healthcare and other essential services. The group looked toward the future as historic investments for high-speed internet are providing resources to close the digital divide at an unprecedented level.



BroadbandOhio Digital Opportunity Summit

Regional Digital Inclusion Alliances

As part of the State Digital Equity Planning Grant Program, BroadbandOhio established Regional Digital Inclusion Alliances (RDIA), dividing the state into five commonly recognized regions (Northwest, Northeast, Central, Southeast, Southwest). Each RDIA is led by one organization and supported by a steering committee of representatives from across the region with experience serving the covered populations. Through a competitive process that evaluated existing experience and readiness, the following organizations were selected and awarded planning grant funds to lead their RDIA in February 2023:

- Northwest – Toledo-Lucas County Library
- Northeast – Cleveland Foundation
- Central – Smart Columbus
- Southeast – Buckeye Hills Regional Council
- Southwest – United Way of Greater Cincinnati

(Digital Opportunity Contd.)

Stakeholder Outreach & Engagemet

To develop Ohio's Digital Opportunity Plan, BroadbandOhio took a comprehensive, multi-layered approach to collaboration and stakeholder engagement by leveraging existing stakeholders, developing new relationships, and using multiple outreach channels.

- RDIA lead organizations were announced at the Digital Opportunity Summit in February. From March-June 2023, RDIA leads hosted 32 in-person listening sessions, six virtual sessions, 20 stakeholder interviews, and 10 community pop-up events, reaching more than 600 Ohioans. Regional outreach and engagement by RDIA leads is ongoing.
- BroadbandOhio hosted 32 in-person listening sessions across the five RDIA regions and six virtual sessions to support stakeholder outreach and engagement for both the BEAD and State Digital Equity Planning Grant programs. Sessions were tailored to specific stakeholder groups (business and internet service providers, local government, nonprofits and community organizations, Ohio residents) but open to all to attend.
- BroadbandOhio also interviewed key state agencies and partners that serve the covered populations. This group includes, but is not limited to, agencies responsible for workforce development, transportation, economic development, education, health, family services, agriculture, and natural resources. The objective of each interview was to capture insight into each agency's priorities and potential synergies with BroadbandOhio.
- BroadbandOhio, with support from RDIA leads and their networks, also deployed an Internet Access Survey that's available for stakeholders to complete online or in-person at community anchor institutions from April-June 2023. Additional surveys were mailed with stamped return envelopes to 10,000 households in unserved communities. The resident survey included 21 questions total, with 16 coming from six topics and five based on location and demographics. BroadbandOhio received 5,188 valid resident responses across all forms of the survey from throughout the state's 88 counties, representing each of the covered populations.



BroadbandOhio Digital Opportunity Summit

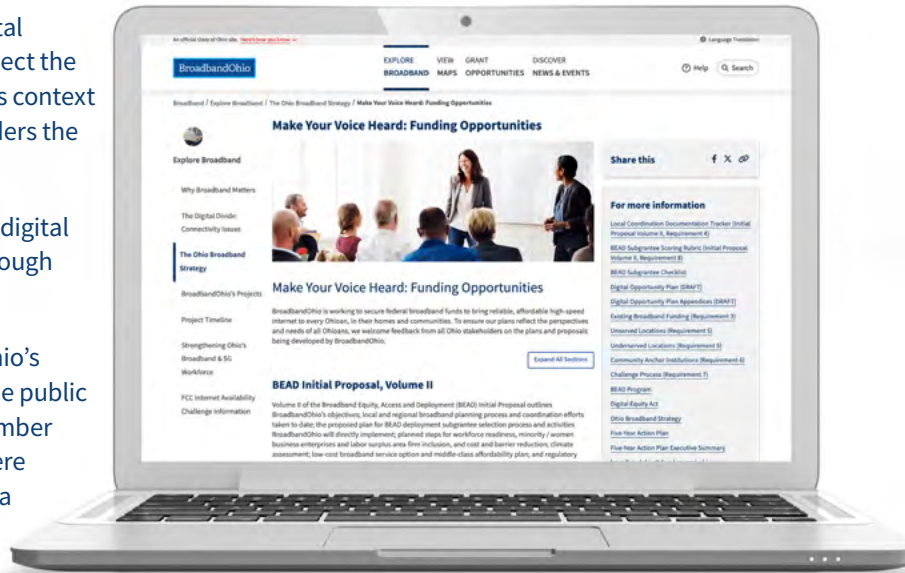
(Digital Opportunity Contd.)

Digital Opportunity Plan Draft

During the summer, BroadbandOhio began drafting a Digital Opportunity Plan which will continue to be updated to reflect the needs of Ohioans over the coming years. The Plan provides context on the current state of the digital divide in Ohio and considers the next steps through implementation.

The Plan offers readers context on the current state of the digital divide in Ohio and begins to look forward at next steps through implementation.

The Digital Opportunity Plan was posted on BroadbandOhio's "Make Your Voice Heard" webpage for public comment. The public comment period was held August 17, 2023, through September 22, 2023 (37 days). Outreach and engagement activities were conducted to encourage feedback during this period, and a total of 118 comments were received. A draft of the plan was sent to the NTIA for review at the end of September.



Digital Inclusion Pilot Projects

Digital Inclusion Pilot Projects: BroadbandOhio released the application May 24, 2023, for Digital Inclusion Pilot Projects, a competitive grant opportunity to fund organizations that support digital inclusion efforts. BroadbandOhio received more than 100 applications by the June deadline and ultimately selected nine organizations: Goodwill Columbus, Accompanying Returning Citizens with Hope (ARCH), Ashtabula County Farm Bureau, Central Community House, Hocking Athens Perry Community Action (HAPCAP), Mercy Health – Toledo, National Church Residences, Ohio University, and the Spanish American Committee for a Better Community. Grantees will have through January 2024 to spend funds and are required to provide BroadbandOhio a report for inclusion in the final draft of the Digital Opportunity Plan by Dec. 1, 2023.

Next Steps

BroadbandOhio continues to engage with stakeholders to finalize the Digital Opportunity Plan and ensure it represents all Ohioans, with a specific focus on covered populations. During the upcoming year, Broadband Ohio will have the opportunity to apply for federal capacity building grant funds to implement Digital Opportunity Plan activities. Those include offering digital inclusion grants, hosting the second annual Digital Opportunity Summit, and continuing to support Regional Digital Inclusion Alliance activities.



Special Projects

Creative Housing Pilot Project

BroadbandOhio is providing high-speed internet connectivity to help hundreds of central Ohioans with developmental disabilities retain their independence and receive specialized care without leaving home. They awarded the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities \$600,000 in grants for a one-year pilot program to provide broadband access for up to 500 residents with developmental disabilities so they can access critical remote support services.

Remote supports include motion detectors, bed and shower sensors and tablets. They also allow off-site providers to monitor and respond to someone's health and safety needs using real-time video conferencing technology such as Skype, FaceTime, or StationMD, an online telehealth platform offering a broad network of board-certified clinicians.

More than 60 people are already receiving remote support services from this initiative, with approximately 100 more slated to be signed up soon. Additionally, this program has provided more than 340 people with access to StationMD.

This pilot project came together through a partnership between BroadbandOhio, the Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities, and Creative Housing, a Columbus-based nonprofit dedicated to providing safe, accessible, and affordable housing to individuals with disabilities in central Ohio.



Franklin County Board of Developmental Disabilities



Department of Development

BroadbandOhio

Butler County Student Connectivity Project

The Butler County Student Connectivity Project provides students living in a Butler County mobile home community with free internet access through a state-funded grant. The Butler County Educational Service Center was awarded a \$95,000 grant that was used to bring high-speed internet to K-12 students living in the Rochester Hills mobile home community.

Infrastructure for the project was provided by Cincinnati-based altafiber, with BroadbandOhio providing connectivity to those homes for a period of three years. Butler Tech and Monroe Local Schools were also enlisted to provide technical assistance and served as integral partners in the planning and implementation of the project.

(Special Projects Contd.)

Darke County Project

The Darke County Board of Commissioners, along with their collaborators, are committed to providing a scalable solution to reliable and affordable fiber connectivity to rural Ohioans. In August, BroadbandOhio awarded Darke County Board of Commissioners a \$500,000 grant to bring fast, reliable connectivity to rural Drake County.

To achieve this, the Darke County Board of Commissioners created a cooperative joint venture with Agile Network Builders, LLC, to extend Agile's hybrid fiber fixed tower sites. This will strategically provide the most coverage throughout rural Drake County and will maintain the infrastructure related to the hybrid fiber wireless network. This grant will provide the funds necessary to secure contracts intended to assist with the expansion of the hybrid fiber wireless network, improving the connectivity availability for to more than 90 percent of the rural county.

Bascom Project

In March of 2023 BroadbandOhio awarded Bascom Mutual Telephone Company a grant for \$3 million dollars. The purpose of the grant is to assist with the construction of middle-mile fiber infrastructure to create multiple rings throughout Seneca County that can be utilized as the backbone for the NCE/Bascom last mile expansion above and, possibly, additional backbone connections.

The Project associated with this grant will consist of approximately 148.1 miles of new fiber and 57.2 miles of existing fiber, with 17 miles to be leased. Wi-Fi access points will be installed at each township office that participates to allow free Wi-Fi access to residents. Bascom Mutual Telephone Company, along with their collaborators, are committed to providing a scalable solution to reliable and affordable fiber broadband to rural Ohioans. To do so, Bascom Communications has created a cooperative joint venture with North Central Electric Cooperative to provide the county with fiber broadband with a minimum capable speed of 100/100 Mbps and Gig/10G capability.

Molly Carren Agricultural Connectivity Project

In September, the Ohio Department of Development announced state support of a \$125,000 in funding for a groundbreaking initiative by The Ohio State University. The funding helped establish high-speed internet connectivity to Ohio State's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (CFAES) Molly Caren Agricultural Center in London, Ohio. The high-speed connectivity site can be used as a demonstration area and proving grounds for autonomous farming equipment.

This project is expected to generate valuable insights into the effectiveness of semi- and fully autonomous farming equipment that will help shape the future of agriculture. It also aims to serve as a model for other states, highlighting the potential for this technology to increase efficiency, reduce environmental impact, and enhance overall productivity in the agricultural sector.

At the 2023 Farm Science Review, the team at the Molly Caren Agricultural Center hosted a live demonstration of several pieces of precision farming technology benefiting from the connectivity: an unmanned Kubota M5 tractor and Great Plains Turbo Max tillage tool, a 360 Rain Crop irrigation system, and a "Connect CoW," or Cell-on-Wheels, which is a mobile site that provides stable network coverage in areas traditionally lacking established access.



BroadbandOhio Community Accelerator

In August 2023, Governor Mike DeWine, Lt. Governor Jon Husted, and Ohio Department of Development Director Lydia Mihalik announced seven teams from nine counties will participate in the second cohort of the BroadbandOhio Community Accelerator program, aimed at helping communities leverage funding for broadband expansion.

Participating in this round of the Accelerator program are Team Ashtabula County, Team Henry County, Team Lucas County, Team Monroe County, Team Paulding County, Team Union County; and Team Hocking, Athens, and Perry Counties.

The Accelerator program prepares communities to establish and implement a full-scale broadband connectivity vision. Through more than 30 hours of no-cost, expert counseling provided by BroadbandOhio, The Ohio State University Extension, and industry experts, the program offers structured engagement for communities to identify broadband goals, gather data, understand available funding options, target capital dollars to support implementation, and learn more about the role broadband plays in workforce development.

Four teams, comprised of 50 representatives from 11 counties, participated in the inaugural cohort of the Accelerator program last year. Not only did the program provide participants with the knowledge and resources to better leverage broadband funding, but it also gave them the confidence to develop grassroots solutions for their own barriers to connectivity.

The second round of the Accelerator program finished in November. BroadbandOhio is actively working with The Ohio State University Office of Extension to continue this program in 2024.



Upcoming Projects

Pole Replacement and Undergrounding Program

The Broadband Pole Replacement and Undergrounding Program was established in HB 33 of the 135th General Assembly, created as a brand-new program in the state's biennial operating budget. The Broadband Pole Replacement and Undergrounding Program will advance broadband service access to residences and businesses by reimbursing the costs of necessary pole replacements, mid-span pole installations, and undergrounding that has taken place after July 1, 2023.

The \$50 million program awards reimbursement grants to qualifying internet service providers to help with the cost of expanding broadband infrastructure. Qualifying broadband service under this program is considered retail wireline broadband service delivering internet access at speeds of 100 Mbps download and 100 Mbps upload. The program will reimburse qualifying applicants for 75% of the total cost of the pole replaced to a maximum of \$7,500 per pole. For Undergrounding costs, the maximum amount to be reimbursed is 75% of what it would have cost to replace the pole to a maximum of \$7,500.

BroadbandOhio Affordability Grant

The Affordability Grant will bring internet service to thousands of Ohioans in densely populated areas that currently lack affordable options. This grant will target areas throughout the state with low adoption rates, meaning internet service providers are providing access but residents are not utilizing these services. Using a similar model to the Mt. Healthy Connectivity Pilot project from 2022 when BroadbandOhio partnered with altafiber to connect 3,000 residents via public hotspots, applicants will identify the needs they wish to address and offer project specifics to be graded on a rubric. Applications will be awarded on a rolling basis by the Broadband Expansion Program Authority. This grant program is set to begin in 2024.

BroadbandOhio Student Connectivity Grant

As education shifts to a greater digital focus, fulfilling the needs of students is paramount to the success of every community. The BroadbandOhio Student Connectivity Grant continues the work that began at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when there was an immediate need for devices and broadband coverage for students outside of the classroom. To meet the needs of students in unserved and underserved communities, the Student Connectivity grant will use the to-and-through model which installs broadband infrastructure near or on school district premises in partnership with an ISP, to then run internet lines to the homes of the district's students. This program is set to begin in 2024.

BroadbandOhio Line Extension Reimbursement Program

Internet service providers can receive a rolling reimbursement through the BroadbandOhio Line Extension Reimbursement Program. This program covers a portion of the expenses of running fiber to unserved homes not necessarily connected to main roads. Reimbursements will be approved by the Broadband Expansion Program Authority on a rolling basis to applicants that provide detailed proof of having completed line extensions past July 1, 2023. This program is set to begin in 2024.



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