

Next Level Connections Broadband Grant Program Q&A

Program Requirements

1. What are eligible project costs?

Eligible project costs include terrestrial capital expenses directly related to a qualified broadband project, including design, construction, engineering, and permitting expenses. Maintenance or operating expenses related to the project do not qualify as an eligible expense.

2. Can the grant fund middle-mile only projects?

The purpose of the grant is to deploy last-mile broadband infrastructure to residential and business locations in unserved areas within Indiana. Grant dollars can only be used for middle-mile related costs if it is necessary in order to provide last-mile service.

3. What areas are eligible for grant funding?

Areas that do not currently have fixed service of at least actual 10 Mbps download speed and 1 Mbps upload speed.

4. What is the maximum grant amount?

The maximum grant amount per project is \$5 million.

5. Will certain types of technology receive preference?

The Office of Community and Rural Affairs (OCRA) is technology agnostic and will not select an application based solely on the proposed technology solution.

Project Area

6. Are partial census blocks eligible?

An applicant may elect to include census blocks that would be partially served by the proposed project. The applicant must identify in the Excel document if a census block would be partially served by the proposed project.

7. Does the project area need to be contiguous?

No. The project area may include areas that are not adjacent to each other. However, the State of Indiana reserves the right to fund partial applications.

8. What census blocks are ineligible?

Any census block that has already received NLC Broadband Grant funding or is receiving federal funds for the deployment of broadband service is not eligible. For example, CAF or other federal grants negate a full census block at this time since many of these are ongoing deployments.

9. What census blocks are eligible for funding?

OCRA has provided a list of the unserved census blocks within Indiana on the NLC [main webpage](#). This serves as a starting point since the FCC Form 477 data does not holistically capture every end-user. Applicants may elect to include census blocks shown as served within the data, and have the opportunity within the Full Application to provide evidence that the census block is truly unserved.

10. What is the eligibility of census blocks that received a valid challenge in the first round?

Census blocks that were challenged in the previous round are not applied in Round II. The focus remains on the unserved census blocks within Indiana. Challengers will need to submit another challenge against the census blocks proposed in the Letters of Intent.

11. If non-terrestrial providers are ineligible entities based on the “qualified broadband project” definition, will they be able to challenge census blocks?

Non-terrestrial providers will not be eligible to challenge census blocks unless they meet the criteria in the “qualified broadband provider” definition.

12. What version of the FCC Form 477 data is in the map?

The map utilizes the June 2018 v1 data as provided by the [FCC website](#). The FCC has published updated data as of December 2018 but this data was not utilized in the Indiana maps: [Indiana Broadband Map](#) and the [OCRA NLC Map](#).

Letter of Intent

13. What documents should be submitted for the Letter of Intent?

OCRA will only accept the two documents outlined in the Round 2 Application for the Letter of Intent phase:

- (1) Letter of Intent (pdf)
- (2) Census Block List (excel)

Any additional documentation must not be submitted at this phase of the application.

14. Can an applicant apply for multiple grants in the same funding round?

Yes, an applicant may submit multiple eligible proposals for a single round provided that each application describes a unique project area.

15. Should applicants include supporting evidence of an area shown as served that should be considered to be unserved?

Unserved evidence must not be provided during the Letter of Intent phase. The applicant will have the opportunity to present this information within the Project Impact section of the Project Narrative, and other corresponding documents of their Full Application submission.

16. How many Full Applications can be submitted if one Letter of Intent is submitted?

An applicant may submit one Full Application for each Letter of Intent that is submitted on time and deemed eligible. Applicants will be notified if their LOI meets the requirements and the entity is invited to submit a Full Application.

17. Will applicants be allowed to adjust their proposed project area (census blocks) and grant request after submitting the Letter of Intent?

Applicants will be able to adjust the grant request amount and the local match amount in the Full Application submission. Proposed project areas may only remove census blocks but may not include additional blocks that are not identified in the Letter of Intent.

18. What is the commitment associated with submitting a Letter of Intent?

There is no commitment in submitting a LOI, and an applicant is not required to submit a Full Application. Applicants will not be eligible to submit a Full Application if a LOI is not submitted on time or is not considered compliant as described in [Section II.D](#) of Round II Application.

19. If an applicant has multiple projects, should the applicant submit an individual Letter of Intent for each project and the corresponding census blocks? Or should the applicant submit multiple projects under one Letter of Intent?

Applicants may submit multiple LOIs provided that each LOI describes a unique project area. For each LOI submitted and deemed eligible, the applicant will be invited to submit a Full Application. It is up to the applicant whether they would like to group all census blocks into one total project or submit multiple LOIs for the separate project areas.

20. Is the partial serve percentage based on land area or total number of passings within the block?

The percentage should be calculated based on the total number of passings (residential, business, and anchor institutions) within a census block.

21. Are the customers served for 2017, 2018, and 2019 broadband customers only or all customers receiving other services i.e. electrical customers?

The responses must be total broadband customers as defined by the legislation in IC 4-4-38-4.

22. How will the office address when multiple providers apply for the same proposed project areas?

OCRA will evaluate each application on its own merits during merit review phase after the Full Applications are submitted. Proposed project areas will not be compared or evaluated by OCRA during the LOI phase. If multiple applications with the same proposed project area are recommended for selection of an award, the Office will utilize the preferences in the legislation along with other program factors to determine which application is selected for an award.

23. Is there a Microsoft Word template for the Letter of Intent?

OCRA will not create a Word template, but will accept a Word version of the template as long as all the required information is included.

24. If an applicant is in the process of working on a partnership, but a partnership has not been created yet, can we still submit LOI?

A partnership must select one entity to serve as the prime applicant for the purposes of the Letter of Intent and Full Application, unless the partnership is forming a separate business organization. The prime applicant must be an eligible entity under the requirements in the application. The applicant should utilize the associated business information for the prime entity.

25. What is an Indiana Bidder Number?

A bidder number is required in many State of Indiana procurement processes, including grant contracts. Businesses are required to have a bidder profile with the Indiana Department of Administration. The Bidder Profile creates a unique ID for the business.

26. Does an applicant need to have an Indiana Bidder Number in order to submit an LOI?

OCRA recommends that an applicant have an Indiana Bidder Number, but it is not required to submit the LOI. The registered business ID number is required so OCRA can verify the creation date of the applicant entity for purposes of eligibility.

27. Is there a Microsoft Word template for the Letter of Intent?

OCRA will not create a Word template, but will accept a Word version of the template as long as all the required information is included.

Challenge

28. Where is the information necessary to challenge a proposed service area located?

The Challenge Phase Instructions, along with the Proposed Census Blocks excel document and the LOI Abstracts pdf documents, are located on the [How to Apply & Challenge](#) page. The Challenge information is located halfway down the webpage.

29. Can a fixed wireless provider challenge census blocks?

Fixed wireless is an allowable technology type under the terms of the program and may submit challenges to proposed census blocks.

30. Does the Affidavit for challenges require that communities are contacted?

The Affidavit does include an option, not a requirement, for incumbent providers to send a notification to local officials that the provider will be challenging proposed project areas submitted in the Letter of Intent phase.

31. Who and/or what position is required to meet the local official notification?

OCRA is not requiring a specific position or entity that must be contacted. Some examples may include the chief elected official of the local unit of government or a local economic development official. This may be the County Commissioner, Council, Mayor, Town Council and councilmembers, President of the economic development corporation, etc. that represent the proposed project area. This is an optional item of the challenge submission.

32. How will an incumbent provider submit an accurate challenge if the LOIs are an estimate?

The Letter of Intent is the maximum proposed project area that an applicant may choose to submit a Full Application. This allows providers to challenge areas based on this information.

33. How will an incumbent provider challenge a partial census block?

The Letters of Intent will provide the census block list and a project summary that will be published for the challenge phase, and address level data will not be published. Challenges are required to include documentation based on the census block and the addresses the provider currently serves or plan to provide service within 24 months.

34. Should a partially served census block percentage be calculated based on population or geographic area?

If a census block is partially served by an incumbent provider, the percentage should be calculated on the amount of passings served within the block relative to the total amount of passings within the census block.

35. Does a Professional Engineer need to stamp/sign the technical specifications for a challenge submission?

Technical Specifications submitted as part of a challenge are not required to have a signature or stamp from a PE. The Affidavit submitted must verify that the challenger has the capacity to provide minimum actual speeds of 10 Mbps downstream and 1 Mbps upstream, and that the broadband infrastructure is designed to meet the identified needs of the challenged census blocks.

36. If a challenge is submitted for a planned deployment, is there specific documentation that should be included to validate construction plans?

There is not specific documentation that must be included for planned construction aside from the required documents outlined in the Challenge Phase Instructions.

37. Is an area considered unserved if a challenger does not provide service to every address within the census block?

OCRA is aware that many census blocks are partially served or split between multiple providers, and has required address level information to be supplied relative to each census block being challenged.

38. Are challenges based solely on FCC Form 477 data?

Challenges are not based on Form 477 data alone. A Challenger may submit a challenge based on whether the entity is already providing eligible broadband service or has the ability to verify plans to provide service by February 2022.

39. How will an applicant be notified if any of the census blocks in their application are validly challenged?

OCRA anticipates publishing the challenge decisions on the website on March 25, 2020 to allow applicants time to make corresponding adjustments to their applications prior to the submission deadline. An announcement will be sent out when the information is available. OCRA plans to notify applicants if their proposed project area is impacted by the challenge determinations.

40. Will OCRA provide the names of the entities challenging a census block?

The names of the organizations that have submitted a valid challenge will be published with the validly challenged census blocks. If there are multiple organizations, then all names will be noted by census block.

41. Will OCRA provide the challenger with a specific reason the challenge was deemed invalid?

Challengers will receive a letter from OCRA stating whether a challenge is considered valid or invalid, and if invalid, a specific reason will be stated in the letter. The letter will be sent electronically.

42. Will OCRA provide additional challenge information?

The information published on the [NLC Challenge Determinations](#) includes a tab labeled Additional Details which includes the census block number, whether the block is fully or partially served, and whether or not the challenge is based on current service or proposed construction.

43. Will OCRA provide the address level data submitted by a challenger to the applicants?

The address level data submitted by a challenger will not be publicly available. OCRA will utilize the address level information submitted by both the applicant and challenger during the Full Application review and scoring period to evaluate individual locations and whether or not they are eligible to receive funding under the program requirements.

44. If an applicant includes a validly challenged census block in their Full Application, will the Application be eliminated from the opportunity to receive a grant award?

If an applicant chooses to include a validly challenged census block in their Full Application it will not necessarily eliminate the application from consideration, as long as the application is competitive through the review process. If an application is competitive, OCRA may choose to negotiate project areas with an applicant by utilizing the address level data provided to the Office by both the applicant and the challenger.

45. Will applicants be able to appeal a challenge decision?

There will not be a direct appeal process for applicants to appeal a challenge decision. Applicants may choose to provide additional evidence that an area should be considered unserved. OCRA may fund partially served census blocks if the addresses proposed do not overlap with an incumbent provider's service areas that meet the 10:1 actual speed minimum.

46. Will challengers be able to appeal an invalid challenge decision?

There will not be a direct appeal process for challengers that receive an invalid challenge. Decisions will be based on the content and form of the required documentation outlined in the [Challenge Phase Instructions](#) document available on the website.

Application

47. Will the format and documents for the grant application be the same as Round I?

The content and form of the requirements has changed. Please read the [Round II Application](#) file on the [How to Apply & Challenge](#) page if you are unfamiliar with the changes.

48. Can Round I applications be resubmitted, including census blocks that were considered ineligible for funding?

Applicants may resubmit proposed project areas in Round II, and any application must meet the content and form requirements described in Section II.C. *Please see Question 8 regarding census blocks.*

49. Is a letter of intent required?

Yes, a letter of intent is required to be eligible to submit a Full Application.

50. Can an applicant combine two of more LOI's into one application if enough census blocks were challenged on each LOI?

An applicant may combine two or more Letters of Intent into one application, as long as it is clearly spelled out that the census blocks were proposed under another control number and now combined into one application. No new census blocks may be proposed when combining control numbers into one applications.

51. Is address level data required?

Yes, applicants must submit address level data with the proposed census blocks in the Census Block List excel document. This must include locations that proposed service will be available as a result of the project, if awarded.

52. What should the applicant provide for the Certificate of Territorial Authority?

An applicant should include the cause number in the Project Narrative document, and may also choose to include a pdf copy of their CTA as an appendix though this is not required.

53. Is the value of a tax abatement considered to be local match?

Local match must be provided in the form of cash. Tax abatements would not qualify as cash match.

54. Can an applicant use its own employees to lay fiber and include that cost toward the grant amount?

The applicant may use its own employees and request reimbursement for those hours under the appropriate line item. For example, if the employee completed construction related to the project, the grantee would request reimbursement under the construction budget category for this work.

55. Is there a standardized survey that can be used to represent unserved areas? Are there specific questions that should be included in a survey?

OCRA does not require a specific format or set of questions to be utilized in a survey to gather unserved data. It is up to each applicant to determine the most applicable question set for the proposed area.

56. Does OCRA have a preferred speed test tool to gather end-user data?

OCRA does not give preference to a specific tool.

57. What level of detail is required for the application in terms of the network design?

A preliminary technical evaluation of the project is required. It must include a project cost estimate, project schedule, and maps showing the proposed project area. It should be certified by a Professional Engineer (PE).

58. What are some examples of community support that an applicant can provide?

The types of community support are flexible depending on the impact this project will have on the community located in the proposed grant area. Some examples could include: letters from educational institutions, healthcare facilities, local elected officials, and future customers in support of the proposed project. This would also include the Broadband Ready certification for the proposed project area.

Community support comprises a portion of the scoring, so OCRA recommends applicants begin collecting this information as early as possible. Applicants are encouraged to work with community partners to identify ways to utilize the proposed infrastructure.

59. What information should be included in a letter of need from residents, businesses, and community members?

A letter of need should clearly explain the need for broadband connectivity within the proposed project area. OCRA recommends that letters of need and support include both quantitative and qualitative information.

Quantitative information may include, but is not limited to, current service levels and/or pricing, speed test information, cost to install, address and census block, etc. Qualitative information may include the inability to complete educational or work requirements, workforce development, access to healthcare and telemedicine, etc.

60. Are organizations applying for the grant allowed to either reference OCRA and Next Level Connections or utilize the logo in efforts to obtain community, business, and anchor institution support?

Applicants may reference the grant program and OCRA in their efforts to obtain support, but may not utilize the logos.

Definitions

61. What is a passing?

Passing is an address that service is/would be available at the location. OCRA has identified three types of passings: household, business and anchor institution. Business is defined as all business types including farms and home-based businesses, and work-at-home/telecommuter use of broadband. Anchor institution is defined as community facilities including public safety buildings like fire and police buildings; hospitals, educational buildings, community centers, libraries; and city, county, state and town buildings.

62. What is a terrestrial connection?

Terrestrial connection is defined as a fixed connection, and not service provided by mobile or satellite carriers. Applications may propose to complete the project with any technology capable of supporting the service levels described in Section I.C.i. of the [Round II Application](#).

63. What is a “unique project area” as stated in Section E. Limitation on Submissions?

Unique project area means the proposed project area is a different set of census blocks for each submission. An applicant cannot submit the same project area multiple times.

64. What does it mean for the service to be “available?”

Determination of service availability will be based on the definition used by the FCC. Service is defined as being available if the provider does, or could, within a service interval that is typical for that type of connection—that is, without an extraordinary commitment of resources—provide two-way data transmission at the speeds prescribed.

A screenshot from a provider’s website demonstrating the lack of service availability at a specific address is an example of evidence that can be provided to prove that service is not available at that location; however, final determinations will be based on all the evidence submitted in the application and during the public comment period.

65. What does the Census Block List document mean when it asks “will third party infrastructure be used”?

Third party infrastructure means that a project will utilize existing infrastructure, which may include but is not limited to utility poles, community owned water towers or grain elevators, to enable to the applicant to offer eligible broadband services to locations in a rural area.

66. What is the definition of “statistically significant survey data”?

OCRA follows procedures that surveys must be statistically significant at the 95% confidence level and confidence interval of five. Applicant may utilize the [Sample Size Calculator](#) that OCRA recommends when entities are unsure of what their sample size should be for a proposed project area.

67. Can you clarify the definition of last mile and middle-mile?

The last mile refers to network infrastructure that carries signals from the network to and from the home or business. Depending on network design and density of the area served, the actual distance of the last mile can be relatively short or may be considerably longer than a mile.

Middle-mile refers to the portion of the telecommunications network that connects a network operator’s core network to the local network (last mile) plant. Middle-mile facilities provide fast, large capacity connections and can range from a few miles to a few hundred miles.

Informational Webinars

68. Will the Letter of Intent webinar recording be available?

The slide deck and the recording from the Full Application webinar are available on the [Resources](#) page within the OCRA NLC webpage.

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