



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, University of Tennessee, Benton Institute for Broadband & Society and Heartland Forward Announce New Tennessee Broadband Accelerate Program to Help Communities Prepare for Broadband Infrastructure Investment**  
*Applications now open for six communities to participate in 16-week community engagement and planning program*

**NASHVILLE, Tenn.** – Today, the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, Benton Institute for Broadband & Society and Heartland Forward announced a new planning and capacity-building program to help Tennessee communities leverage historic broadband infrastructure funding for community-driven broadband expansion. The Tennessee Broadband Accelerate program will help local governments throughout Tennessee receive expert support as they prepare to leverage new dollars that will be made available through the historic passage of the federal infrastructure program. The opportunity is made possible through the financial support of Heartland Forward and its Connecting the Heartland initiative.

“It is critical that Tennessee communities have access to reliable internet in order to achieve economic growth and prosperity throughout the state,” said Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development Commissioner Stuart McWhorter. “We appreciate our partners at the UT Institute of Agriculture, Benton Institute and Heartland Forward for collaborating on this program, which will help boost our efforts to close the digital divide in Tennessee.”

Local units of government – particularly at the county level – are encouraged to apply to receive expert support offered as part of an intensive 16-week community engagement program designed to turn available public broadband funding into sustainable broadband access. Six community teams will be selected to participate in the first cohort, which begins on April 12, 2023.

Each community will recruit a team of at least eight, and up to 15, participants to actively engage in the program. The team should include a combination of local stakeholders from the following entities: city or county governments, development districts, agriculture, educational institutions at all levels, information technology centers, chambers of commerce, healthcare providers, and other applicable entities.

“Through the Tennessee Broadband Accelerate program, communities across the state will get access to the tools and planning resources they need to leverage incoming funding for community-driven broadband infrastructure expansion,” said Taylre Beaty, Tennessee’s broadband program director. “We are committed to bringing broadband access to residents across our state, and this program is an important part of making that goal a reality. We encourage county governments to apply for this cohort. We look forward to seeing its success.”

Tennessee communities stand to receive a significant amount of funding for broadband infrastructure enhancement, thanks to the 2021 passage of the \$1 trillion federal infrastructure plan. Community planning support offered through initiatives like the Tennessee Broadband Accelerate program will help even the playing field so more cities and counties – regardless of size or staffing – can prepare to submit for capital dollars to help transform broadband in their communities.

“By helping communities develop and implement plans to guide local broadband improvements, we can ensure that the historic funding our state receives can be used effectively and efficiently to close the digital divide,” said Sreedhar Upendram, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the UT Institute of Agriculture. “We cannot let this opportunity go to waste, and the UT Institute of Agriculture is proud to play a part in this critical program.”

The Tennessee Broadband Accelerate program works to prepare communities for establishing and implementing a full-scale broadband connectivity vision. Through more than 30 hours of no-cost expert counsel provided by the Benton Institute, the program offers structured engagement for communities to identify broadband goals, understand available funding options and target capital dollars to support implementation.

"The Tennessee Broadband Accelerate program builds on efforts we previously launched with key stakeholders in the state, including a public awareness campaign for the FCC's Emergency Broadband Benefit program to get affordable internet to those in need and placing American Connection Corps fellows in Tennessee communities to help advance high-speed internet access, adoption and utilization," said Angie Cooper, executive vice president of Heartland Forward. "Supporting local planning and capacity building is critical to making sure infrastructure dollars are spent efficiently and in the best interest of the communities they are intended to help, and Heartland Forward is proud to play a part in this work."

Interested communities can apply [here](#). Applications will be accepted until March 13, 2023. Communities will be selected based on the strength and commitment of the team they assemble. Other factors include a community's level of preparedness as evidenced by their application materials, as well as a demonstrated need. Preference will be given to economically distressed counties.

"We are honored to collaborate with the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development , University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture and Heartland Forward to engage unserved and underserved communities in a planning and engagement process modeled after a successful program implemented by Blandin Foundation in Minnesota," said Adrienne B. Furniss, executive director of the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society.

Heartland Forward and the Benton Institute previously joined together with local partners to successfully run similar Accelerate programs in Arkansas, Illinois, and Ohio.

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