Broadband Technical Assistance (BTA) – Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Last Updated: June 27, 2023

General Information

1. **What is the purpose of BTA?**

   BTA provides financial assistance to eligible entities to receive or deliver broadband technical assistance and training and to support the expansion or development of broadband cooperatives.

2. **Where do the funds come from?**

   This FOA will use technical assistance funds appropriated under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) (Pub. L. 117-58).

Federal Award Information

1. **How much funding is available?**

   $20 million is available for funding under the Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA). The maximum and minimum award amounts vary by funding category.

   - Up to $7.5 million is available for Technical Assistance Providers. The minimum award amount is $50,000 and the maximum award amount is $1,000,000.

   - Up to $7.5 million is available for Technical Assistance Recipients. The minimum award amount is $50,000 and the maximum award amount is $250,000.

   - Up to $5 million is available for Projects Supporting Cooperatives. The minimum award amount is $50,000 and the maximum award amount is $1,000,000.

2. **Is there a matching requirement for BTA?**

   No, there are no cost sharing or matching requirements for this award.

Applicant and Project Eligibility Information

1. **What types of organizations are eligible to apply?**

   Only entities legally organized as one of the following are eligible for financial assistance:

   - Federally recognized Tribes and Tribal Entities.
   - States or local governments, including any agency, subdivision, instrumentality, or political subdivision thereof.
   - A territory or possession of the United States.
   - An institution of higher education (including 1862 Land-Grant Institutions, 1890 Land-Grant Institutions, 1994 Land-Grant Institutions, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities.
   - Non-profit organizations with 501(c)(3) IRS status.
   - Cooperatives or mutual organizations.
   - Corporations.
   - Limited Liability Companies or Limited Liability Partnerships.

2. **How may funds be used?**

   BTA funds must be used to support broadband technical assistance activities in rural areas. Broadband technical assistance refers to activities that support high-speed internet expansion into rural areas and may include, but are not limited to, project planning and community engagement, operations, financial sustainability, environmental compliance, construction and engineering, accessing federal resources, and data collection and reporting.

   Examples of eligible projects include, but are not limited to:

   - Assisting entities in identifying and planning for delivering broadband service to eligible rural areas;
   - Identifying resources to finance broadband facilities from public and private sources;
   - Preparing feasibility studies, financial forecasts, market surveys, environmental studies, and technical design information to support broadband services;
   - Preparing reports and surveys necessary to support the need for broadband services, the price range, and to request financial assistance; or
   - Analyzing and improving operations related to the management of broadband facilities (i.e., implement automation, adopt new software, conduct training, etc.) and to the efficiency of the entity.

   Proposed projects must include a component that allows for active participation and substantial involvement by the USDA Rural Development.

3. **Are applicants required to develop a written proposal?**

   Yes. The written proposal should be assembled into one or more pdf file(s) and should conform to the order in which the **evaluation criteria** are presented in **Section E** of the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA). The completed pdf file(s) should be uploaded into *Grants.gov* as an attachment to the application. The maximum limit for the written narrative section is 25 pages. Information exceeding 25 pages for the written narrative may not be considered for evaluation by the scoring panel.

   The Application Guide can be found on the program's website, https://tinyurl.com/2p95jduf, and it provides specific, detailed instructions for each item in a complete application. The Rural Utilities Service emphasizes the importance of including every item and strongly encourages applicants to follow the instructions carefully, using the examples and illustrations in the Application Guide.

4. **What documents are required to complete the application?**

   A fully completed application is required to be considered eligible for funding. For an application to be considered complete, the applicant must complete and submit all forms, information, and supporting documentation in addition to a written narrative proposal. Applicants must complete and submit the following information to apply:

   - Written Narrative Proposal
   - Standard Form 424, "Application for Federal Assistance—Non-construction."
   - Standard Form 424B, "Assurances—Non-Construction Programs."
   - Execute Form RD 400-4, "Assurance Agreement"

   RUS reserves the right to request additional information from the applicant.

   All applicants should carefully review and prepare their applications according to instructions in the FY 2023 Broadband Technical Assistance Application Guide. The Application Guide can be found at: https://tinyurl.com/2p95jduf.

5. **Is the applicant the community that will receive technical assistance or is the applicant the technical assistance provider?**

   BTA is open to both technical assistance providers and technical assistance recipients and either may be the applicant. Please note: All applicants must demonstrate the capacity to deliver or support broadband technical assistance activities.

6. **Can I use funding from this award for construction of broadband in addition to technical support?**

   No. BTA Funds are only used to provide technical assistance to promote the expansion of broadband into eligible rural areas.

   In addition to costs identified as unallowable by 2 CFR parts 200, https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-2/subtitle-A/chapter-II/part-200, or 400, https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2015-title2-vol1/CFR-2015-title2-vol1-part400/summary, award funds cannot be used to pay for the following types of expenses (this is not a comprehensive list of unallowable costs, see 2 CFR part 200).

   - Construction (in any form).
   - Activities serving non-rural communities.
   - Activities supporting communities with existing broadband access.
   - Duplicative project costs such as pre-application expenses that have been funded by another award.
   - Indirect Costs.

7. **Can costs from previous projects (or previous program applications) be refunded with BTA funding?**

   Expenses incurred prior to submission of an application will be at the applicant's own risk. BTA funding is for efforts that would occur after an application is selected for a funding.

8. **Is there a source where an applicant can confirm the level of service in an area?**

   There is no definitive source for determining broadband coverage for a specific area. We recommend using resources available on the Broadband Technical Assistance map as well as other federal sources, such as the FCC broadband availability map. You may also use non-federal sources to help you determine broadband availability in your area.

9. **Are applicants required to name communities we would serve, or can we be awarded for a project and then find a partner?**

   The Project Work Plan should identify rural communities to be served. Additionally, applicants must list all rural communities that will benefit from the broadband technical assistance project and describe characteristics of the communities being served including information such as population size, population density, poverty rate, and other economic indicators.

Evaluation Criteria

1. **How does RUS evaluate my completed application?**

   If your application is determined to be eligible and complete, RUS will further evaluate it based on BTA evaluation criteria. All applications will be competitively scored and ranked according to the following criteria outlined in the BTA FOA:

   - **Work Plan (up to 30 points)** The applicant can receive up to 30 points for soundness of the proposed broadband technical assistance approach outlined in their workplan. The scoring criterion will be based on the following:

     o Work Plan Approach – The work plan should identify and detail project objectives, rural communities to be served, project key goals, partnerships developed or to be developed, and anticipated deliverables of the project. Applicants must list all rural communities that will benefit from the broadband technical assistance project and describe characteristics of the communities being served including information such as population size, population density, poverty rate, and other economic factors.

     o Work Plan Implementation – Applicants should include details on how the technical assistance will be provided and how it will lead to expanded broadband service in rural areas. Applicants should detail major tasks, involvement of key personnel, time period of tasks, substantial involvement from Rural Development staff, and expected deliverables.

     o Budget to Work Plan Alignment – A detailed budget and budget justification must be provided. The budget justification should align with the tasks detailed in the workplan. Discuss how the budget specifically supports the proposed activities discussed in the Project Key Tasks (see Key Priorities section in the FAQs). The format of the budget's narrative can be in a chart, spreadsheet, table, etc., but it should be readable on letter-size, printable pages. The information needs to be presented in such a way that the reviewers can readily understand what expenses are incurred to support the project. Statement(s) of work for any subcontractors and consultants must be included as part of the application.

   - **Organizational Capacity (up to 20 points)** All applicants must demonstrate the capacity to deliver or support broadband technical assistance activities. The applicant can receive up to 20 points based on organizational capacity and qualifications. The maximum 20 points for this criterion will be based on the following:

o The applicant's proposal should demonstrate that the applicant has identified appropriate key personnel, both in terms of number of personnel and qualifications of personnel and should provide specific detail of qualifications of key personnel relating to broadband technical assistance. Capacity of personnel to access data for needs assessments and access to planners and other technical experts will be evaluated.

o Applicants that are technical assistance providers should specify the number of years in which they've provided broadband technical assistance, detail their experience in providing broadband technical assistance to rural communities, identify types of rural communities they've previously served, and detail their experience in performance evaluation.

- **Targeted Communities (20 points)** The applicant must describe how the proposed technical assistance activities will benefit targeted communities. The applicant should provide detail on how the project will promote the expansion of broadband within the targeted communities. Describe how the plan will help entities plan for and access broadband funding opportunities. The applicant can receive 20 points if at least 50 percent of the rural communities benefiting from the project consist of:

  o Tribes and Tribal Entities
  o Colonia Areas
  o Persistent Poverty Counties, or
  o Distressed Energy Communities

A GIS layer of the areas noted above can be found on the RUS mapping tool located at: https://tinyurl.com/2p95jduf. A certification from the appropriate Tribal official is required if a project is being proposed by a non-Tribal applicant over or on Tribal Lands.

- **Rurality (up to 20 points)** Points will be awarded for serving the least dense rural areas as measured by the population of the communities served.

- **Economic Need (up to 20 points)** Economic need is based on the county poverty percentage of the communities proposed to be served in the application. The percentages must be determined by utilizing the United States Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program. Communities located in geographic areas, for which no SAIPE data exist, will be determined to have an average SAIPE poverty percentage of 30 percent. SAIPE data can be found on the BTA website.

- **Performance Measures (up to 10 points)** The applicant can receive up to 10 points based on the proposed performance measures to evaluate the progress and impact of the proposed project. Performance measures should be based on the applicant's proposal and must include a description for how the results of the technical assistance will be measured and the benchmarks to be used for measuring effectiveness. Indicators to be used should be specific and be quantifiable.

2. **Are funds awarded on any other basis besides the scoring criteria?**

Applications will be ranked by the final score of the evaluation criteria. RUS will select applications based on those rankings, subject to the availability of funds. RUS has the authority to limit the number of applications selected in any one state or for any one project during a fiscal year. Additionally, an application receiving fewer points can be selected over a higher scoring application if there are insufficient funds available to cover the costs of the higher scoring application.

Key Priorities

1. **What are the key priorities that RUS would like incorporated in the project?**

RUS encourages applicants to consider projects that will advance the following key priorities (more details available at https://www.rd.usda.gov/priority-points):

- Assisting rural communities recover economically through more and better market opportunities and through improved infrastructure.
- Ensuring all rural residents have equitable access to RUS programs and benefits from RUS funded projects.
- Reducing climate pollution and increasing resilience to the impacts of climate change through economic support to rural communities.

Substantial Involvement Requirements

1. **The project requires active participation by RUS. Do I need to know which staff will be involved in the workplan and do I need letters from RUS saying they support my workplan with their involvement?**

No, specific RUS staff do not need to be identified in the proposal nor does the proposal need to include letters of support or commitment from RUS.

Within your workplan, you should describe how you envision involving RUS staff and how you would work cooperatively in involving them in your broadband technical assistance project. If selected for award, the Agency will assign a point of contact to the award recipient that is

tasked with meeting the need for active participation and substantial involvement. If tasks are not identified where RUS can actively participate and provide substantial involvement, the application will not be eligible for funding.

2. **Once the application is approved and criteria met, is there continued involvement from USDA?**

   The award is through a Cooperative Agreement and the nature of a cooperative agreement requires continued collaboration between the awardee and USDA RUS staff through the life of the project. Examples of measurable substantial involvement include, but are not limited to, the following:
   - Joint convenings of community members, partners, and stakeholders.
   - Joint delivery of training for RUS programs.
   - The development of training sessions and outreach materials.
   - Joint efforts to form new broadband cooperatives and support existing cooperatives efforts to expand broadband service into rural areas.

3. **Can the applicant proposed that federal agencies other than RD be partners in the cooperative agreement?**

   While an applicant may propose that other federal agencies may be partners, they are not required to do so. However, the application must clearly detail substantial involvement of RD staff.

How to Submit an Application

1. **How can applicants register on [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov/) ?**

   To register in the Grants.gov system, go to https://www.grants.gov/, click "Applicants," then click "Get Registered." We recommend you review the registration instructions **at least two weeks** before you plan to submit.

   NOTE: At the time of application, each applicant must have an **active** registration in the System for Award Management (SAM) before submitting its application in accordance with 2 CFR part 25 (https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-2/subtitle-A/chapter-I/part-25. Applicants must also ensure they complete the Financial Assistance General Representations and Certifications in SAM.

2. **How can applicants apply online?**

   Follow Grants.gov system registration requirements (information is available at this link: https://go.usa.gov/xJ7gF) to register to be able to submit your application. We

recommend you review the registration instructions **at least two weeks** before you plan to submit. You will find the BTA application by entering Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) number 10.752 in the CFDA drop-down under "Basic Search Criteria," located at the top left of the Search Grants webpage, available at grants.gov/search.

3. **Can I submit more than one application?**

   No, applicants should not submit more than one application. RUS will approve no more than one application per applicant. If an applicant submits more than one application for different projects, then the Agency will only consider the application with the highest score. If an applicant submits more than one application for the same project, then the Agency will only consider the latest submission.

4. **How can applicants make sure all required documents are included in the application prior to submission?**

   All checklists, application materials, and standard forms necessary for submission are noted in the program's application guide, which can be found on the program's website (https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/telecommunications-programs/broadband-technical-assistance-program)

5. **What is the application deadline?**

   Applications must be submitted through Grants.gov and received no later than June 20, 2023, to be eligible for funding under this opportunity. Late or incomplete applications will not be eligible for funding.

6. **Can applicants mail applications to USDA Rural Utilities Service if there is a technical issue with Grants.gov?**

   No. Applications must be submitted electronically using **Grants.gov** by the deadline, and you must assume the risk of any delays in submitting your application. No other form of application will be accepted. If system errors or technical difficulties occur, use the customer support resources available at the Grants.gov website.

7. **How do I upload my project narrative and supporting documents to grants.gov?**

   Application documents should be attached to the SF-424 Form. Applicants should use the "Add Attachments" button under Block 15.

Definitions

1. **What does broadband technical assistance mean?**

   Broadband technical assistance refers to activities that support broadband expansion into rural areas and may include, but are not limited to, project planning and community engagement, financial sustainability, environmental compliance, construction planning and engineering, accessing federal resources, and data collection and reporting.

2. **What does cooperative agreement mean?**

   Cooperative agreement is the instrument used to fund the support of RUS's goals of increasing rural economic growth. In a cooperative agreement, federal employees participate more closely in project activities, often working side-by-side with the cooperator.

3. **What defines a rural area?**

   Rural area refers to any area, as confirmed by the most recent decennial Census of the United States, which is not located within a city, town, or incorporated area that has a population of greater than 20,000 inhabitants; or an urbanized area contiguous and adjacent to a city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants; and which excludes certain populations pursuant to 7 U.S.C. 1991(a)(13)(H) and (I). For purposes of the definition of rural area, an urbanized area means a densely populated territory as defined in the most recent decennial Census.

4. **What does "substantial involvement" mean as part of the cooperative agreement?**

   It is the intent of this project to engage RUS staff in broadband technical assistance activities, and it is the responsibility of the applicant to identify specific tasks where RUS staff can provide measurable, substantial involvement in the project. If such tasks are not identified, the application will not be eligible for funding.

Award Procedures

1. **How will RUS notify the awardees selected to receive a grant?**

   RUS notifies applicants whose projects are selected for awards by mailing or emailing a copy of an award letter. The receipt of an award letter **does not** authorize the applicant to commence performance under the award. The award letter will include an agreement that contains all the terms and conditions for the cooperative agreement. An applicant **must** execute and return the agreement, accompanied by any additional items required by the agreement, within the number of days specified in the selection notice letter.

2. **When will awards be made?**

Awards are anticipated to be made by September 30, 2023.

3. **How does my organization receive funds after we have been awarded the grant and executed the required documents?**

The awardee will use Form SF270, "Request for Advance or Reimbursement," to request reimbursements along with the corresponding receipts for expenditures, and any other documentation to support the request for reimbursement.

4. **Are there any reporting requirements after the award has been made?**

Yes. The awardee is required to submit Annual Project Performance Activity Reports, Annual Audits, and a Final Performance Report. The final report may serve as the last annual report. The final report must include an evaluation of the success of the project in meeting BTA objectives. Please see the FOA for more information on reporting requirements.

Other Questions

1. **How do I know if our project will serve targeted communities?**

You can view targeted communities on the RUS mapping tool located at https://tinyurl.com/2p95jduf.   A GIS layer of the areas noted below are considered targeted communities for this FOA.

- Tribes and Tribal entities.
- Colonia areas.
- Persistent poverty counties.
- Distressed energy communities.

2. **Can RUS staff review an application or project proposal before it is submitted to determine if it is competitive?**

RUS staff are unable to review applications before their submission.