GUIDANCE FOR THE LIBRARY COMMUNITY:

PREPARING A PROPOSAL FOR THE BROADBAND TECHNOLOGY OPPORTUNITIES PROGRAM (BTOP)

July 10, 2009

The economic stimulus legislation (officially known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or ARRA) that was signed into law in February of 2009 allocated a total of $7.2 billion in funding to provide or improve broadband connectivity. Two federal agencies – the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in the Department of Commerce and the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) in the Department of Agriculture – were identified to administer this funding. Accordingly, NTIA established the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) and RUS established the Broadband Initiatives Program (BIP) to manage the funding to be awarded under the respective agencies. The program requirements for the first round of funding – the Notice of Funds Availability (NOFA) – were released on July 1, 2009 with applications due on August 14, 2009.

We have summarized the main points of the NOFA in a companion paper, "Broadband Funding: American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA)," though all prospective applicants must also read the NOFA carefully. Although there are funding possibilities for libraries in both BTOP and BIP, we conclude that there is significantly more opportunity for the library community in BTOP, specifically in the funding categories *Expand Public Computer Center Capacity* and *Stimulate Broadband Adoption*.   It is possible that the BTOP *Broadband Infrastructure Fund* and BIP may become more accessible to libraries if certain changes are made in subsequent NOFAs; at this time there is no guarantee that such changes will be made.

SOME POINTERS FOR BTOP APPLICATIONS

Collaboration, cooperation, and multi-purpose are the watchwords at NTIA. For example, projects that address more than one BTOP purpose (e.g., a project that focuses both on broadband infrastructure and adoption) are preferred. However, such a project will require a separate application for *each* funding category.

NTIA encourages applicants to develop partnerships and has publicly stated that an application encompassing multiple libraries is much more likely to be successful than an application from a sole

library.[1] This preference for collaboration extends to other community anchor institutions such as schools, so for example, you may wish to contemplate a library-school combined application. Inclusion of letters of commitment or similar documentation will strengthen your application. More generally, letters of endorsement from influential members of the relevant community are also desirable.

Partnerships are especially important for larger broadband infrastructure projects – specifically applications to the BTOP Infrastructure funding category. At this writing, it is uncertain whether libraries can plausibly apply for BTOP Infrastructure funds on their own. However, libraries are attractive partners for telecommunications service providers, who would be the primary applicants. In such a case, your service provider must be willing to file an application.

Governors will be invited to provide input on the relative priority of applications from their states after NTIA completes initial reviews. Thus, it is in your interest to educate the governor's staff about any applications that contain benefits for libraries. You may wish to focus on how libraries contribute to the economic, educational, and social well-being of the communities within the state – followed by an explanation of why high-speed broadband is an essential infrastructure for today's libraries. You may want to contact your state's library association or state library agency to see what efforts may already be underway in relation to contacts with your state's Executive branch.

An important and possibly difficult issue for applicants is the required 20% match. Although in-kind matches are permitted, cash matches will be scored more favorably. Matches above the minimum 20% will also yield a scoring advantage. The inability to provide the 20% match will cause an adverse impact in scoring. NTIA may allow waivers in very limited situations. Applicants seeking waivers should be prepared to "open their books" and prepare significant documentation outlining why it is essential for them to be granted a waiver.

A key concern is how the project's activities will continue when grant funding expires (i.e. sustainability). You need to address this concern directly. Of course, the E-rate program may help with recurring costs. You may wish to consult with your local E-rate advisor or state library E-rate coordinator to ensure that your project's recurring costs will qualify for E-rate discounts.

Put yourself in the reviewer's shoes. What would you want to see? Reviewers (*who, by the way, are volunteers – that is, unpaid*) will appreciate compelling and concise applications with relevant and strong documentation. Submitting an application that includes everything and the kitchen sink is not likely to please reviewers. The bottom line is to make the reviewer's job as easy as possible – to make it obvious in a straightforward way that your excellent application merits funding.

Reviewers will appreciate a straightforward argument:

1) Why is the problem to be addressed important?

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[1] Stated at the BTOP-BIP workshop at National Harbor (Maryland) on July 7, 2009.

2) How is the proposed solution appropriate and innovative? Also, is this solution potentially applicable to other contexts?

3) What are the expected outcomes from your project?

4) Why is the requested funding essential for the performance of this project?

Also, you should not assume that reviewers will know much about the modern role of libraries. In particular, linking the role and activities of libraries to the purposes of the ARRA – such as creating and preserving jobs and stimulating local economies – is highly desirable.

Find your own reviewer! Can you get a thoughtful, knowledgeable, trusted, and critical reader of your draft application who can measure your application against the BTOP requirements in the NOFA? This kind of feedback will give you the means for strengthening your application. If possible, someone from *outside* of the library community is preferable.

NTIA is emphasizing compliance (the much talked about "transparency and accountability") – think about it early in the application process. The requirements for reporting and financial and procurement management are quite considerable. Applicants are advised to understand these requirements and decide that they can live with them before undertaking the effort to develop a full application.

We recommend that you manage expectations within your community. Although there is a significant amount of funding available, we expect there to be a large number of applicants. The competition for a grant may well be quite keen and, therefore, even a compelling, quality proposal might not be funded.

When should you submit an application? The application window for the first round of funding is very tight. Can you pull together a strong application in this time? If not, you may wish to consider submitting your application in a subsequent round – so that you will have months, not weeks, to complete your application. Of course, your competitors in subsequent rounds will also have that additional time to develop *their* strong applications. Also keep in mind that the program requirements (the NOFA) may well change for subsequent funding rounds, which could be advantageous – or not – for your application, depending on your proposed project and how the program requirements change.

Finally, we strongly advise you not to submit your online application the day of the deadline. You may experience technical difficulties with submitting your application because of site overload and jeopardize your application.