

Program Overview

This grant program is open to community anchor institutions (CAIs) such as libraries, community centers, affordable housing developments, municipal or tribal buildings, and other gathering places that enable workforce training, education, and health monitoring for people most impacted by the digital divide.

Grants between \$250,000 and \$2 million will be awarded for capital improvements, such as facility construction and renovation, broadband infrastructure, and essential assets like affordable devices for public access and lending programs. This grant will not fund overhead or programmatic costs.

The first step of the application process opens on December 1, 2023, when organizations may complete an [interest form](#). Selected organizations will be invited to submit full applications. The full application opens on January 19, 2024, and closes on March 29, 2024. Awards will be announced in May 2024. If funds remain, the application will re-open on a rolling basis from June 2024 through October 2024. Construction for all projects must be completed by 8/31/2026.

Program Criteria

To qualify, projects must meet the following minimum criteria. Please note that additional details can be found in the appendix.

- **APPLICANT ELIGIBILITY:** Applicants must be a 501c3 non-profit organization or a community, municipal, county, state or tribal government entity.
 - *One organization may be a lead applicant, coordinating other partners engaged in the project and programming that may be offered through a project.*
 - *The applicant or lead applicant must either 1) own the building or 2) have a lease agreement that extends at least five years after project completion.*
 - *Applicants leasing the property must provide a letter of support from the property owner.*
- **REQUIRED PROGRAM ELEMENTS:** Proposed projects must offer programming or facilitate activities in the areas of education, work, and health monitoring as defined by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in its ["Guidance for the Coronavirus Capital Funds Project Fund."](#) Applicants must demonstrate that these programs or facilitated activities, as well as associated program compliance and reporting requirements, can be sustained for a minimum of five years beyond the construction phase of the project.
- **PEOPLE SERVED:** Proposed projects must provide these programs and services primarily or exclusively to individuals defined as "covered populations" by the Digital Equity Act. These include:
 - *Low-income households*
 - *Older adults (60+)*
 - *Incarcerated individuals or individuals in reentry*
 - *Veterans*

- *Individuals with disabilities*
 - *Individuals who are English-language learners or have low literacy*
 - *Individuals who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups*
 - *Rural inhabitants*
 - *Note: other populations not named in the Digital Equity Act that face substantial barriers to digital equity may also be considered, for example, unhoused individuals and individuals in long-term recovery from substance use disorder.*
- **HIGH-SPEED INTERNET:** Projects must provide or outline plans in their applications to provide broadband internet access (100/100 Mbps) to the Hub facility. Preference will be for 1Gbps service.
 - **ACCESS TO COMPUTERS/TABLETS:** Proposed projects must provide or plan to provide access to devices for use on-site and/or for loaning, and on-site technical support.
 - **LOW BARRIER TO ACCESS:** Proposed projects must be open to the public or must exclusively or primarily serve covered populations (above). The facility must be available to access at no cost or low cost. In the latter's case, the applicant must justify how its fees meet the "low-cost" criteria.
 - **CODE COMPLIANCE:** Projects must include plans for ensuring the facility is in full code compliance, including ADA accessibility and any other relevant building and safety codes.
 - **COMPLIANT AND COMPLETE BY 8/31/2026:** Projects must demonstrate through a project plan and contingency plans that they can complete construction by 8/31/2026 and be in good standing with all program compliance and reporting requirements.

How to Apply

The Connectivity Hub program is not an open, competitive grant process. Potential applicants must be invited to apply.

1. **STEP 1:** To be invited, potential applicants should complete the [Interest Form](#) in the MCA grant portal. MCA staff will follow up by email or phone. The form will include organization, contact information, three sentences about the project concept and partners, and the facility's location, type, and ownership. Selected applicants will receive an email inviting them to begin the application.
2. **STEP 2:** Applicants must complete the online application in the MCA Grant Portal once invited. Applications submitted by February 29, 2024, will be reviewed and considered for the first grant round to be approved in May 2024. All other applications will be reviewed and approved on a rolling basis.
3. **STEP 3:** Proposals under review may receive technical assistance and support from MCA staff. MCA staff will notify applicants in March or April 2024 if they will be considered for approval in the initial grant round in May 2024. All other applications will be reviewed on a rolling basis, and MCA staff will notify applicants if they will not be considered for award.

Appendix

Timeline

A first round of grants will be awarded in May 2024, and applications will be invited, accepted, and approved on a rolling basis thereafter until funding is expended.

Application & Grant Contracting Timeline

December 1, 2023	Interest Form Opens
December 4, 2023	Information Session
January 19, 2024	Application Opens
February 29, 2024	Interest Form Closes
March 29, 2024	Application Closes
May 17, 2024	Awards Approved by MCA Board (expect 6-8 weeks for contracting phase)
May 20, 2024	Awards Announced
June 3, 2024	Application Re-Opens on a Rolling Basis if Funds Remain
Oct/Nov 2024	Estimated final date for MCA Board approval of Connectivity Hub projects
December 20, 2024	All approved grantees need to have fully executed grant contracts

Project Selection Priorities

MCA will select projects that meet the greatest number of the priorities outlined below, while ensuring an overall diversity of projects, geographic locations, and populations served. MCA is conducting data analysis to help inform targeted outreach to identify potential projects for this program. This analysis will inform the following priorities and will be the basis upon which MCA will provide technical assistance and guidance to applicants:

- **AREAS WITH NO OR POOR INTERNET SERVICE AVAILABILITY:** Facilities located in towns and/or census tracts with a high percentage of people who have no connection or are unserved, as defined by the Maine Connectivity Authority.
- **GAPS IN COMMUNITY ANCHOR INSTITUTION ACCESS:** Facilities in towns or census tracts lacking nearby accessible community anchor institutions. Community anchor institutions include schools, libraries, community centers, and hospitals and are more broadly defined in [Maine's Initial Proposal under the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program](#).
- **NEAR MIDDLE MILE ROUTES:** Facilities in locations that may be able to connect to existing or planned Middle Mile routes, namely MCA's planned Moose Net project.

Applicants will also be asked to demonstrate how the following priorities will be incorporated in each project:

- **LEVERAGE EXISTING GATHERING PLACES:** Projects involving a facility already serving as a gathering space for their communities or a specific targeted population.
- **LED BY IMPACTED PEOPLE:** Projects owned, operated, or managed by impacted people who identify as members of covered population groups and/or organizations that directly serve and work with these covered population individuals and communities. Projects where programs are offered in languages other than English by native speakers.
- **ALIGNED WITH DIGITAL EQUITY GOALS:** Projects in which proposed program offerings will contribute to goals in [Maine's digital equity plan](#), for example, ACP enrollment support, digital skills classes, internet safety education, no-cost/low-cost device access, or support to access government resources/programs.
- **ALIGNED WITH OTHER GOALS:** Projects that advance other state or regional goals, such as economic development, workforce development, educational attainment, telehealth access, healthy aging, climate resilience, or other goals.
- **NEED & IMPACT:** Projects that effectively describe and demonstrate the need for the project and associated programming for the people and communities it's meant to serve, as well as the potential impact that could be achieved.
- **ACCESSIBLE:** Projects accessible via public transportation or local transportation programs (such as a ride-share), are in walkable areas, or otherwise have planned to ensure the target population can access the resources provided. Projects that prioritize accessibility for individuals with disabilities and universal design.
- **INTERNET SAFETY:** Projects should take reasonable cybersecurity measures to ensure the safety and security of individuals using devices or the wifi network. This includes properly removing personal data from devices between users, soundproofing private spaces that might be used for sensitive purposes such as telehealth video calls, and appropriate network security protocols.
- **COLLABORATION:** Projects should be collaborative wherever possible, drawing on the expertise of multiple partners to provide education, workforce, and health monitoring or telehealth programming.
- **SUSTAINABILITY:** This program will prioritize projects owned by a non-profit organization or municipal or tribal government or entity over leased, privately owned buildings.

During a review process, each of the priorities listed above will receive a score between 0-2, with the following descriptions:

- A score of 0 means that the proposal hasn't demonstrated that it meets the priority
- A score of 1 means the proposal has demonstrated that it meets the priority baseline
- A score of 2 means that the proposal has demonstrated the project is particularly strong on that priority

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A proposal must meet all program criteria and receive a score of at least eight on program priorities to be eligible for an award. MCA will also consider the following factors when prioritizing projects for this program overall, including:

- Diversity of different types of projects
- Range of geographic locations
- A mix of projects that serve specific populations with unique barriers and projects that serve multiple target populations
- A range of projects in terms of the number of people reached per project: prioritizing those that reach the most people while also making room for projects that make a deep impact on a smaller group of people
- Inclusion of one or more projects in tribal communities
- Inclusion of one or more projects in affordable housing buildings or communities
- Inclusion of one or more projects that provide services in languages other than English
- Funding available relative to the requested amount

In some cases, MCA will select projects that meet fewer priorities for individual projects than other proposals if those projects help us reach our goal for the program as a whole. For example, if a project is proposed to serve a specific geographic area or specific covered population not already represented in the overall grant pool. If an Applicant is invited to apply, meets the criteria for the program, scores at least eight on the priorities for the program, and fits with the MCA need for a diversity of projects within the grant pool overall, it will be recommended for approval.

Funding Available

The total funding available for the Connectivity Hub grant program is \$11.2 million. MCA expects to award between 16-20 projects in total, in 2024. All projects must be completed by August 31, 2026. Grant sizes will range from \$250,000 to \$2,000,000, with a minimum grant size of \$250,000 and a maximum grant size of \$2,000,000. This range enables a variety of projects, from building renovations and technology improvements to new construction. Awardees must meet all quarterly and other reporting requirements throughout the duration of the project, upon completion, and in annual reporting requirements for five years after completion.

Data Analysis

Applicant invitations to apply and the selection of projects in this program will be informed by a data analysis conducted by MCA to identify areas that best match the project goals. MCA will use this analysis to help target underserved areas or areas where a project could have the biggest impact; applicants can use this analysis to prioritize a project location if needed. This analysis will include the following information in geospatial terms:

- Percentage of, and the total number of, individuals for each covered population group (or proxy data) - (including low-income households/individuals)
- Percentage of, and the total number of, locations with no connection or unserved

- Presence (or lack thereof) of community anchor institutions (basics: schools, libraries, community centers, hospitals)
- Proximity to Middle Mile existing or planned routes
- Percentage of, and the total number of, population with a high school degree
- Percentage of, and the total number of, population who are unemployed
- Average driving distance to primary care provider

Eligible Expenses

The grant is designed to support capital expenses that enable program offerings or access to technology and the internet within the [Treasury Capital Projects Fund guidelines](#). Eligible expenses include:

Building Connectivity

- Reasonable permitting, make-ready, and other one-time facility, pole and conduit licensing costs
- Physical infrastructure to provide connectivity, such as racks, cabinets, routers, etc.
- Physical wiring of the building or areas of the building to provide connectivity; examples may include wifi infrastructure, and wiring (including in ceilings and between floors) to facilitate internet access

Outside Plant (Building Exterior and Land)

- General facility construction and renovation costs, including but not limited to mechanical work, electrical work, and construction; this construction and renovation should establish or enhance spaces where the public or targeted population group can use connected devices or participate in programs offered at the facility; examples may include constructing a new building or a building expansion or renovation
- Shelters and cabinets to house equipment and electronics necessary to provide connectivity (switches, routers, distribution frames, optical layer devices, etc.)
- Physical infrastructure to provide connectivity, e.g., fiber optic cable, conduit, etc.
- Land and/or building purchase and related expenses such as title work and real estate fees

Inside Plant (Building Interior)

- General facility construction and renovation costs, including but not limited to mechanical work, electrical work, and construction; this construction and renovation should establish or enhance spaces where the public or targeted population group can use connected devices or participate in programs offered at the facility; examples may include constructing physical rooms or technology to enable program delivery
- The costs of physically operationalizing the Hub include classroom construction and design, private spaces to facilitate technical support and telehealth support or use, or equipment and technology to facilitate workforce hands-on training

Equipme

- Digital devices and technical equipment (computers, tablets, printers, and other technology to enable program delivery and device access,) insurance, and maintenance
- Equipment costs such as desks, furniture, and other direct expenses to enable program delivery

Staffing & Services (For Project Construction Only)

- Professional services or staff costs necessary to enable the capital investment itself, such as design/engineering/architectural plans or legal services
- Reasonable project management costs to the applicant organization related to the management of the proposed capital project
- Documented internal labor costs for the project construction itself; labor costs for *operation* are not allowed
- Costs associated with completing the application, including pre-project development costs such as data-gathering, feasibility studies, community engagement and public feedback processes
- Costs associated with monitoring of and reporting on project in compliance with requirements, including award closeout costs
- Costs associated with collecting and measuring performance data and conducting activities needed to establish and maintain a performance management and evaluation regime of the project

Ineligible Expenses

This program supports capital investments only. The following expense types are ineligible for funding:

- No program delivery or program staffing expenses will be permitted.
- No overhead or general operating expenses will be permitted.
- No monthly internet service expenses will be permitted.
- Smartphones/phones are not eligible devices under this program.

Schools and Hospitals

To be eligible for this funding, schools and hospitals must provide services that enable work, education, *and* health monitoring above and beyond their traditional functions ([CPF Guidance](#), p. 7). Schools are eligible if they “provide a comprehensive academic program to their students and adult education in the community at large; health monitoring to their students and the community; and workforce training or career counseling services that provide community members with the knowledge needed to engage in work, including digital literacy training programs,” ([CPF Guidance](#), p. 6). Hospitals must similarly provide community services in the areas of work, education, and health monitoring that extend beyond their patient population.