

**BROADBAND FOR THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING CORPORATION**

1050 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Tenth Floor- Number 1053  
Washington, D.C. 20036

November 30, 2009

The Honorable Larry Strickling  
Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information  
Broadband Technology Opportunities Program  
National Telecommunications and Information Administration  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
HCHB Room 4887  
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20230

**Re: Comments of Broadband for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing on Request for Information Regarding the Allocation of Broadband Grant Funding**

Dear Assistant Secretary Strickling:

I am writing to you to on behalf of Broadband for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Corporation (“BDHH”), an applicant for a sustainable adoption grant under the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (“BTOP”). BDHH welcomes this opportunity to respond to the joint request of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (“NTIA”) and the Rural Utilities Service (“RUS”) for comment on the application and review process and on numerous policy issues related to the allocation of remaining funds. BDHH urges you to incorporate the three principles discussed below into the Notice of Funds Availability (“NOFA”) for the second and final round of BTOP funding.

**Principles**

**1. Increased Focus on Sustainable Broadband Adoption Grants**

In awarding the second round of funding, NTIA should increase its focus on sustainable broadband adoption grants and should allocate additional funding for these grants. The Recovery Act requires that *at least* \$250,000,000 be expended for sustainable broadband adoption programs. This allocation represents only 5.32% of the \$4,700,000,000 allocated to BTOP. NTIA is authorized to, and should, allocate additional funds to sustainable broadband adoption programs in order to carry out BTOP’s goals. One of the five core objectives established for BTOP by the Recovery Act is the provision of “broadband access, education, awareness, training, equipment, and support to...organizations and agencies serving vulnerable

populations.”<sup>1</sup> I urge you to place more emphasis on this goal because broadband infrastructure does little good if Americans cannot afford broadband access, do not know about the benefits of broadband access, or do not have the education or support necessary to use broadband. For this reason, BDHH strongly recommends that NTIA at least double the scant 5.32% allocation of funding for sustainable broadband adoption programs.

## **2. Priority Should Be Given to Programs Serving the Most Vulnerable Populations – Those with Disabilities, Who are Disadvantaged, and Have Low-Incomes**

The Recovery Act places a special emphasis on BTOP grants for proposals to serve vulnerable populations. To advance that statutory goal, BDHH urges NTIA to prioritize applications to provide service to disabled, disadvantaged, and low-income groups (also referred to herein as “targeted projects”) above other applications. BDHH also recommends that NTIA specifically allocate funds for projects that serve targeted vulnerable population groups.

The first priority of BTOP should be to bring broadband to those without access today. To do otherwise – to focus on speedier broadband for those who already have broadband – would do a disservice to the vulnerable populations who have no broadband service at all. BDHH recommends that NTIA use two mechanisms to prioritize projects designed to serve vulnerable populations. First, NTIA should amend its points-based application evaluation system. Second, NTIA should consider certain significant factors that are not easily quantified.

### **a. Changes to the Points-Based Application Evaluation System**

Under the points-based evaluation method for the first BTOP application round, sustainable broadband adoption applications could receive up to 30 points for project purpose, 25 points for project benefits, 25 points for project viability, and 20 points for project budget and sustainability. BDHH recommends that NTIA revise its scoring system for the second round to award more points to projects that target vulnerable disabled, disadvantaged and low-income populations. Specifically, BDHH recommends that NTIA either (1) allocate additional points to the project purpose and project benefits categories in order to properly weight targeted project proposals; or (2) weight the base application score for targeted project proposals by a multiplying factor.

Similarly, NTIA should award additional points to applicants which are led by members of a disabled or disadvantaged group. Just as NTIA took into consideration an applicant’s status as a socially and economically disadvantaged small business concern in the first round of applications, an applicant’s status as a member of a vulnerable group should be considered.

### **b. Certain Qualitative Factors Must be Considered**

NTIA seeks comment on metrics that could be used to evaluate applicants. Metrics are a useful tool, but some of the most pressing needs are difficult to measure. The most vulnerable populations, who are disabled, who are poor, who lack broadband access today, are geographically dispersed and notoriously difficult to count precisely. For example, as organizations serving the deaf have noted, despite the myriad opportunities that “broadband

---

<sup>1</sup> The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Pub. Law 111-5, 123 Stat. 115 (2009).

offers to Americans with communication disabilities, there remains a paucity of comprehensive data about broadband subscribership among this population.”<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, an application that is required to provide metrics of new end users or increased adoption rates will contain, at best, approximations and, at worst, artificially inflated numbers designed to receive favorable consideration. Further compounding the issue, definitional inconsistencies will prevent targeted applications from being compared fairly. For example, as the Federal Communications Commission has recognized, broadband adoption can be measured in various ways (*i.e.*, based solely by home penetration; based on the manner, type, or frequency of use of certain types of applications; etc.).<sup>3</sup> It is entirely conceivable that some applicants will provide estimates of increased broadband adoption rates based on an end user’s use of a specific application while others will provide estimates based on home penetration rates. Any comparison of these applications would be inequitable, and requiring each applicant to create definitions and explicate every underlying assumption made in reaching the estimates provided would be overly burdensome.

If NTIA focuses only on easily-measured factors it will not be giving applications a complete review. To put quantifiable factors above all others would disserve the very groups most in need of BTOP funds. Easy-to-measure does not necessarily mean most important. Easy-to-quantify does not necessarily capture all the important considerations that should be weighed in evaluating a BTOP application. How do you measure the value of bringing broadband internet service to a poor family with a disabled child? What metric adequately captures the “jump start” a family gets when a deaf mother can communicate for the first time by phone with her child’s teacher?

BDHH encourages NTIA to weigh the qualitative benefits of proposals to serve targeted vulnerable populations. For example, a program such as BDHH that proposes to provide broadband internet access to the low-income deaf will enable deaf children to access online educational resources tailored to their needs. The direct impact of accessing these resources on the child’s current development and the indirect impact on the child’s achievements in life cannot be represented in numerical format, but the importance of such benefits cannot be denied. Employing a qualitative approach in reviewing targeted applications is the only way in which the BTOP objective to serve vulnerable populations will be fulfilled.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Coalition of Organization for Accessible Technology *Ex Parte* Comments on the International Comparison and Consumer Survey Requirements in the Broadband Data Improvement Act, Federal Communications Commission, GN Docket No. 09-47 (filed Apr. 10, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Comment Sought on Broadband Adoption, Public Notice, Federal Communications Commission, GN Docket Nos. 08-47, 09-51, 09-137, DA 09-2403 (rel. Nov. 10, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Further, employing a qualitative approach will in no way undermine the efficient allocation of BTOP funding. All targeted proposals that seek to bring broadband access to a given population without building broadband infrastructure will be inherently cost-effective. These programs will leverage the resources of existing broadband providers to provide service. Given the current market and economic pressures on broadband providers, the costs of broadband service have already been adjusted to a competitive level, and those receiving grant funding will likely be able to negotiate further discounted rates. Also, because the majority of funds will be spent on access costs, there will be a direct correlation between the funds allocated and the new broadband users reached. The cost-effectiveness of any

### **3. The Terms “Unserved” and “Underserved” Should Not Be Based Solely on Geography**

As NTIA has noted, several applicants have suggested that the current definitions of “unserved” and “underserved” are unclear and overly restrictive, preventing worthy projects from being eligible for grant support. BDHH echoes these concerns and urges NTIA to broaden its definitions of these terms before allocating the remaining BTOP funds. Both terms are currently defined narrowly by reference to geographic areas represented by contiguous census blocks. This rigid geographic focus precludes funding to projects that are targeted at discrete but geographically-dispersed populations. For example, it is undeniable that disabled populations such as the deaf are underserved, if not fully unserved. However, because deaf individuals live throughout the country, projects that seek to reach the deaf population would be at a disadvantage under the majority of current BTOP funding programs.

BDHH recommends that NTIA revise its definitions to be more inclusive of vulnerable population groups. “Underserved” and “unserved” should be redefined to include discrete population groups with below average access to broadband service and below average subscribership rates. This approach will ensure that projects that propose to serve diffused disabled and disadvantaged groups receive much-deserved consideration.

#### **Conclusion**

BDHH urges NTIA to advance the statutory purpose of the Recovery Act by adopting these recommendations.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

*Signature Authorized by*

Dr. Robert Davila  
Chairman  
Broadband for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

---

additional costs spent to reach the target population and educate the population about the benefits of broadband can be readily evaluated under the existing reasonableness evaluation criteria.