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**HEARTLAND
FORWARD**
AN INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMIC RENEWAL

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**SECOND COHORT OF ACCELERATE ILLINOIS BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAM
SELECTED**

Communities participating in 14-week intensive broadband planning program in collaboration with Heartland Forward and the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society

SPRINGFIELD, III – Heartland Forward and the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society today announced the six communities selected to participate in the second cohort of the Accelerate Illinois Broadband Infrastructure Planning Program, which is administered in partnership with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). The newest cohort of participants include: Bond County, Kankakee County/Pembroke CDC, Kaskaskia College area, Livingston County, Ogle County and Peoria/Woodford Counties.

Building on the success of the first cohort, which included the City of Springfield, Jackson County, Knox County, Mercer County, Whiteside County and the Village of Elsah, the second cohort will participate in a 14-week intensive training program to help leaders from participating communities develop broadband plans to address their unique local needs. The training will position them to effectively leverage newly available state and federal broadband infrastructure funding.

“Achieving digital equity is a top priority for my administration, and the State is thrilled to support a second cohort of communities through this initiative,” **said Governor JB Pritzker**. “Localities across the state have an unprecedented opportunity to receive funding thanks to Connect Illinois and President Biden’s infrastructure bill, and I want to ensure they’re prepared to utilize this funding effectively. I’m grateful to our continued partnership with Heartland Forward, the Benton Institute and other stakeholders for making this program a success.”

“Initiatives like Accelerate Illinois are crucial to ensuring that communities of all sizes and capacities can help their residents get connected to internet and close the digital divide,” **said Lt. Gov. Stratton**. “The first cohort has been doing great work to develop plans, and I look forward to seeing the success of this new cohort of communities as they undergo training for this crucial endeavor.”

Because of the recent passage of the \$1 trillion federal infrastructure plan, Illinois communities stand poised to receive historic funding for the expansion of broadband infrastructure. This is in addition to the State of Illinois’ \$420 million capital plan and funds made available through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Accelerate Illinois will help level the playing field, so communities of all sizes and staffing levels can prepare to apply for these funds and effectively expand high-speed internet access in their communities.



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“Programs such as Accelerate Illinois are essential for providing communities with the tools and planning they need to effectively utilize the new historic funding levels for broadband infrastructure expansion and improvement,” **said DCEO Director Sylvia I. Garcia.** “I look forward to seeing this next cohort’s success in bringing increased digital equity to their communities.”

The Accelerate Illinois program is a collaborative effort between the Illinois Office of Broadband, the Illinois-based Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, and the University of Illinois Extension, as well as funding by Heartland Forward. The training is designed to guide communities through the process of establishing and implementing a full-scale broadband connectivity vision. With more than 30 hours of no-cost expert counsel provided by the Benton Institute, the program provides structured education and engagement for communities to identify broadband goals, gather information, analyze opportunities, understand available funding options, and target capital dollars to support broadband infrastructure implementation.

“Through our Connecting the Heartland initiative, Heartland Forward is committed to supporting efforts to get all Illinoisans connected to the high-speed internet necessary to working, living and learning in the 21st century. Rural and under-resourced communities often lack the capacity to take advantage of federal funding, and we are working to make certain they are prepared to capitalize on this,” **said Angie Cooper, chief program officer of Heartland Forward.** “Programs like Accelerate Illinois are important, and we are thrilled to support this second cohort of communities following the success of the first six participants. We hope this is an example for other heartland communities.”

“Accelerate Illinois is already contributing to efforts to close the digital divide in Illinois and throughout the heartland, and we look forward to welcoming a new cohort of communities to the program” **said Adrienne B. Furniss, executive director of the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society.** “Benton Institute is proud to partner with the Illinois Office of Broadband and Heartland Forward to provide resources and mentorship for the six communities in this second cohort.”

“Bond County may be one of Illinois’ smallest counties, but we have already shown a deep commitment to expanding affordable robust internet access to all our residents,” **said Jacob Rayl of Bond County.** “We look forward to beginning the Accelerate Illinois program and anticipate it will help us achieve our mission to provide the highest level of broadband internet service, county-wide, with a focus on achieving digital equity for currently unserved and underserved populations in both communities and remote rural areas of the county. These enhancements will be achieved through significant county-wide core fiber enhancements, and partner/community collaborations.”

“The Kankakee County Board is excited to assemble and lead this cohort comprised of rural residents from across our County,” **said County Board Chairman Andy Wheeler.** “Today’s digital economy demands stable, high speed broadband, and our rural children, working adults, and our agribusiness community must be connected or risk being left behind. This process will help us shape both policy and the implementation of a robust network that serves these rural residents now and into the future.”

“Kaskaskia College has a long history of providing affordable, accessible higher education opportunities to prepare students for personal and professional success, but they also need access to a reliable and affordable



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internet connection that allows them to put the skills we teach to work,” **said President George Evans of Kaskaskia College.** “We’re thrilled to be selected to participate in Accelerate Illinois, and believe it’ll help us achieve our goal of closing the digital divide in Clinton, Fayette, Marion, Bond and Washington counties.”

“Over 10,000 Livingston County residents, nearly 30% of the population, lack access to basic broadband coverage, but we do not have to accept that as reality any longer,” **said Marty Fannin, Livingston County Board Member and IT Committee Chair.** “Historic funding is available to help us meet the high demand for internet service in the county, and we are confident that Accelerate Illinois can prepare us to leverage available funds to get our residents connected.”

“Accelerate Illinois is an opportunity for Ogle County to build out our broadband infrastructure, increase bandwidth, and stimulate competition among existing providers, which will benefit the essential community services in the county and all of our residents,” **said Patricia Nordman, Vice Chair of Ogle County.** “Our participation in Accelerate Illinois will help us create and implement a five year County Broadband Infrastructure Plan that will deliver broadband to our rural homes and businesses throughout the county, and we look forward to rolling up our sleeves and getting to work.”

“Both Peoria and Woodford Counties share the challenge of getting our rural residents connected to the reliable internet service they need to live, work, and learn in the 21st century,” **said Chris Setti of the Greater Peoria Economic Development Council, who’s team will be coordinating the efforts with Peoria and Tazewell counties.** “Through our participation in Accelerate Illinois, we hope to improve broadband connectivity, deepen technology adoption, and integrate digital inclusion strategies into community and economic development efforts. We’re confident that this effort will help in our overall goal to close the digital divide and get all our residents, regardless of where they live, connected.”

For more information about the Illinois Office of Broadband, visit the [DCEO website](#).

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