**Community Development Block Grant/COVID funding made available to assist with Broadband/Digital Divide**

**Office of Housing and Community Development announces program intended to assist with Broadband connectivity in response to the COVID pandemic**

***New grant program seeks innovative programs and partners***

The Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD) today released the availability of funding to support innovative and long-term sustainable projects to increase internet access for low- and moderate-income households across the state. The new program provides financial resources to eligible organizations and municipalities in support of initiatives to bridge the digital divide.

“During the pandemic, households had increased reliance on digital connectivity. Access to such became essential for employment, education and daily activities. It is our intent to address barriers to low- and moderate- income households, assuring they have access to high-speed internet at home for critical resources and information”

One important aspect of the “digital divide” centers around access to high-speed internet, also known as broadband. Broadband is provided by a series of technologies that give users the ability to send and receive data at volumes and speed that support applications such as telemedicine, distance learning, remote work, public safety and civic engagement. Disparities in broadband access can have adverse economic and social consequences on those left behind.

In Rhode Island, 49,573 families or 12.2% of households, are not connected to the Internet and another 34,936 families or 8.6% only have access via a smartphone and data plan, making nearly a quarter of Rhode Islanders under-connected (2019 American Community Survey).

While there are a number of initiatives to help bridge the digital divide including a recent initiative by Rhode Island Housing, there are still gaps in access to high-speed internet. In response, OHCD has made these funds available and is seeking proposals that will provide low-and-moderate income Rhode Island residents with long-term, high-speed access to the internet. Partnerships, pilot projects, ‘out-of-the-box thinking’ and replication of successful projects from across the country are strongly encouraged.

The program represents OHCD’s commitment to helping Rhode Islanders and complements existing initiatives rom cable providers, Rhode Island Housing, the state and non-profit community to provide tablets and hot spots and improve internet use and digital literacy.

A total of $1.5M of CDBG/CV funding is preliminarily available. The grant term is for one year and non-profit organizations, public housing authorities, municipalities, faith-based organizations and community housing development organizations are eligible to apply.  Applications will be evaluated on the proposed population served, need in the community, program sustainability, partnerships, organizational capacity, and program innovation, as well as several other key metrics.

**Complete information on the program and how agencies and municipalities can apply, can be found at** [**http://www.ohcd.ri.gov**](http://www.ohcd.ri.gov) **. The deadline for submissions is Thursday, August 19, 2021 at 3:30 pm EST. Applications must be in the hands of OHCD staff by this date and time. NO EXCEPTION TO THIS DEADLINE WILL BE PERMITTED.**