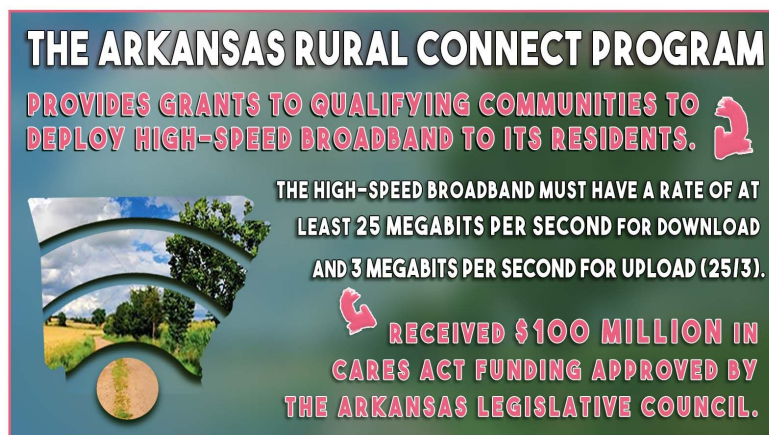




Arkansas House Newsletter

September 4, 2020

Connecting Arkansas



With more Arkansans working and learning remotely in an effort to stop the spread of coronavirus, the issue of broadband access has become increasingly relevant. Yet as broadband access becomes more necessary to normal modern life, there is growing concern about a digital divide, whereby some areas are cut off from opportunities for distance learning and economic development by a lack of adequate broadband service. Those with lower incomes and people living in rural areas are particularly likely to face digital obstacles when trying to do schoolwork at home during the Covid-19 outbreak.

That is why House and Senate leadership recently made a request to the CARES Act Steering Committee to transfer \$100 million of CARES Act funding to the Arkansas Rural Connect Program (ARC). The committee agreed with the recommendation and the measure was ultimately approved by the Arkansas Legislative Council.

The Arkansas Rural Connect program is a grant program designed to expand the broadband footprint in rural Arkansas communities. The ARC program will provide grants to qualifying communities of at least 500 people

to assist in the deployment or improvement of high-speed broadband to its residents.

The ARC program builds on the work of the Arkansas General Assembly. In the 2019 Regular Session, we passed Act 198 which gave municipalities and other public entities new options to apply for funding to deploy broadband.

Arkansas currently ranks 41st in broadband access. This relatively low ranking is closely related to the fact that over 20% of Arkansans remain without access to a wired broadband connection capable of 25 Mbps speeds or faster. But with the added funding, we hope to see access improve.

To date, the ARC program has awarded 21 projects. Those projects have a total of more than \$27 million.

There are more projects that have been submitted and are currently being reviewed.

Communities and providers may still apply. The Department of Commerce will continue to receive applications until all funds are expended or until there is not enough time left to deploy broadband and meet the CARES Act deadline of December 30, 2020.

We have provided a link to the grant application [**HERE.**](#)