

Apply for a Broadband Breakthrough

How's your broadband? Across your county, does everyone have the fast, reliable, and affordable internet services necessary for today's world of precision agriculture, e-commerce, distance learning, and telehealth? If not, is there a plan to fix it or are community leaders just hoping for the best as federal and state funding becomes available?

The Opportunity

World-class broadband is a necessity for rural communities to thrive and survive. *Broadband Breakthrough* is an ag-focused community engagement and broadband planning program. Program organizers will select 10 counties in Missouri—which will be split into two cohorts—to receive in-depth technical assistance to ensure they receive their share of broadband funds and use them to create the best possible broadband networks.

The Program

Broadband Breakthrough is a four-month guided self-help program where community teams gather critical information, set priorities, and create partnerships with broadband providers. Teams of 8 to 15 members meet weekly for two hours. Expert presentations are done in the first hour with all team members from the five participating counties. The second hour is reserved for each county to meet and plan their own work in a Zoom breakout room or on-site locally.

Through the program, each community will accomplish the following:

- Create a broadband vision and goals statement outlining desired outcomes
- Conduct a community broadband survey (with extensive guidance and assistance)
- Interview current and prospective broadband providers
- Review and analyze provided broadband maps
- Host a *Broadband Breakthrough* team visit in your community
- Create a countywide broadband plan with up to four hours of Benton Institute assistance
- Create and deliver a presentation of the plan to the *Broadband Breakthrough* cohort as preparation for local presentations to county boards and other local organizations

Informational Webinar Series

(click date to
register)

[2/12/24 at 11AM](#)

[2/20/24 at 1PM](#)

[2/26/24 at 12PM](#)

With support from the Ford Foundation, the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society will organize and deliver the program sessions and guide community planning. In addition, Benton is gathering additional collaborators:

- The University of Missouri Extension will provide essential expertise on community survey implementation and reporting;
- The Missouri Office of Broadband Development will provide detailed broadband mapping support;
- Other partners will provide tools that will help communities quantify the value of high-performance broadband on crop production and map vertical assets that might be used as telecommunications tower sites.

Eligibility and Criteria

All rural counties in Missouri are eligible to apply for *Broadband Breakthrough*. We will select ten rural counties to participate in two separate cohorts. Applicants can propose regional or multi-county approaches but note that the larger geography and stakeholder numbers can limit effective planning. It is recommended that adjacent counties apply individually and then collaborate as makes sense.

The most important factor in the selection process is the demonstrated strength of the team and members' commitment to participate in weekly cohort meetings. Team members should include leaders from local government, the agricultural sector, anchor institutions, economic development agencies, and more.

How to Apply

Please submit the following information to Bill Coleman at bcoleman@benton.org. **Program applications are due by March 1, 2024.** The first cohort will begin on March 27th.

1. Community contact person
2. Short community description
3. Brief assessment of the current broadband situation
4. Team members' names and affiliated organizations/roles
5. Documented team member commitment (member letters or one letter with signatures)
6. Identify key staff leadership and support for this initiative
7. Describe any past or current work on community broadband initiatives and the benefits/frustrations of this work

Questions can be sent to Bill's email address (bcoleman@benton.org) or by calling him at 651-491-2551. The Benton team is happy to meet with prospective communities to explain the program, answer questions or review the draft application and provide feedback.