

Ryan Johnston 0:04

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Ryan Johnston, Senior Policy Counsel here at next century cities. And today, we have a very special treat. We are joined by Sarah Morris, the Senior Advisor with the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. Sarah joined the NTIA back in March of 2022. So congratulations for almost one year, there, but before NTIA, she was the director of new America's Open Technology Institute, and prior to joining New America, she worked for a public interest law firm. She has a BA, JD and LLM from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. So, Sarah, thank you so much for being here with me today.

Sarah Morris 0:51

Thanks, Ryan. Thanks for having me. And it's you know, love to follow the work that Next Century Cities is doing. You've been important partners as we've navigated these historical investment programs in the future of our of Internet access and adoption in our digital economy. So happy to be here and happy to answer questions.

Ryan Johnston 1:11

Well, thank you. So I guess let's start with the first the big question. Where are we right now in the BEAD timeline?

Sarah Morris 1:20

Yeah, it's a great, great, level setting question. So we're at kind of a pivotal moment, we spent 2022 really driving applications from the state. So we have these programs, we've Well, first we we started, we wrote our NOFOs that was in place as I was joining about a year ago. We published those NOFOs, early in May of last year. And that kicked off of a period of time where we were really trying to get every state and territory throughout the country to submit their application materials for both their bead planning funds and their digital equity planning grant funds. We were really pleased to get full participation from every state and territory across the United States. In both of those programs, which I think some people weren't sure we would do. We got planning grants awarded last year. So now we're in 2023. We're really focusing now on implementation, we'll start to see in the coming months plans from all corners of the country. Those plans will detail how each state will connect all of their residents to affordable, reliable high speed internet service. So we're going to spend the next several months working hand in hand with states if they put those plans together. Then on the other side of getting those plans in evaluating the plans, providing feedback and ultimately approving plans and starting to get money out the door once that happens.

Ryan Johnston 2:55

So getting a little bit more specific on that. So right now, we've had kind of this January 13, deadline pass. What does that mean for you all over at NTIA?

Sarah Morris 3:09

Yeah, so this relates to the maps. And just to maybe step us back a tiny bit. So as part of the infrastructure investment and jobs act, or what is sometimes referred to as the bipartisan infrastructure law. Congress told NTIA that we must use the FCC broadband maps which were moderniser which were directed to be modernized through what's known as the broadband data Act, which passed in 2020. So Congress told FCC, they had to modernize their maps, they told NTIA we have to use those maps to determine how much money each state gets as part of our allocation formula set in the statute. So we've been working closely with the FCC for the past year or so to understand the new mapping process, where different touch points occur, and how we can direct states to engage in that process to make these map states and other stakeholders to make these maps as robust as possible before we make the the allocations. We also know that the the need on the ground for affordable reliable high speed internet is high.

Sarah Morris 4:31

We hear from stakeholders every day about the the critical need of connectivity on the ground and communities all across the country. So we've really been my mindful and cognizant of the need to to address that concern, and move as quickly as possible recognizing that this the bead program is not a it's a it's a big program with lots of steps and there's going to be steps even beyond allocation that states are going to have to navigate, and we're here every step of the way to help them with that. So that's sort of the background for. So there's been a lot of talk of this January 13th date, which we're now just on the other side of. We committed right before the maps were officially the public version of the maps were published in November. We communicated a timeline publicly, that was pegged towards a June 30 allocation date. So we didn't pick that date out of thin air. This was a product of dialogue with the FCC conversations with stakeholders and a recognition that we needed to, to meet this need. This urgency on the ground. In order to to, to work within the FCC is challenged prompt resolution process for challenges on the availability data and the new maps.

Sarah Morris 5:59

We sort of had to count backwards. And we wanted to make sure we were being candid with folks who were engaging with the map so that they understood each how long each phase of the adjudication process at the FCC took. And they were being realistic with the expectations that folks had about when they needed to get challengers in in order to ensure that they were resolved in time for that June 30. Date. So January 13, reflects a slightly condensed version of what's in

the FCC regulations as it relates to the map. So under the FCC regs, you file a challenge, the challenge, ie the person to whom the availability challenge is directed, usually an ISP has 60 days to respond. And then there's another 60 days contemplated in the regs for those the parties in this challenge process to come to some sort of agreement. If that agreement doesn't happen, and the FCC has up to 90 days to adjudicate the the challenge and come to a resolution and rule and then roll that challenge back into the map. The FCC had, has committed to expediting their part as much as possible. And so that's where you get this January 13, to June 30 window. Now, a couple of caveats there.

Sarah Morris 7:22

We've been we've tried to not talk about January 13 as a deadline, but rather a demarcation in the calendar. And a goal for folks to get challenges in so that they know that even if the challenge exhausts the full length of time contemplated in the FCC regs that it will get resolved in time for that June 30 date. Challenges we'll get result, we don't have some challenges, we'll get results more quickly. Some may take the full length of time. But certainly we're encouraging all states and other stakeholders to still file availability challenges with the map if they believe a location is misrepresented as being served by a particular provider or not.

Ryan Johnston 8:04

So one of the kind of, you know, all of most of our members or all of our members are local governments. So what would you say is kind of the the biggest thing that local leaders need to know about the mapping process right now kind of given the breadth of everything that's kind of happening at the moment.

Sarah Morris 8:24

I think it's important to remember that there will be a lot of changes to the public facing map between now and June 30. What you see in the map now is not necessarily what you'll see, when you look again, as we get closer to the allocation timeline. That's true for a couple of reasons, we've been talking about availability challenges, and like I said, the FCC is going to continue to resolve those challenges on a rolling basis, even as more come in. And so you'll see periodic updates to the map on you know, like, let's say a bi-weekly cadence.

Sarah Morris 8:55

You'll also see over time between now and June 30, changes to what what the FCC refers to as the map fabric. So if you think about the map is having two layers, two key layers, one layer is the map of all the dots. This is the map of broadband serviceable locations. A location that could

be served by a mass market broadband product, something you'd call up Comcast, or Verizon or whoever and say like, I'd like to subscribe to this at my home.

Sarah Morris 9:28

The and that happens on a six month cadence rather than on this like ongoing periodic basis, because you have to challenge the location and then the internet service providers have to have the opportunity to say whether if it's a new location to say whether or not they serve it. So the FCC is in the process, they heard challenges to the availability, but they hear challenges to the fabric, they accept them at any time, but at some point, they have actually been cut off to roll them into the next version of the map. So we're in a period of time right now, where challenges that were filed on that, prior to that initial release of the map.

Sarah Morris 10:41

Those are getting those have been processed, and resolved. But now those new look, newly added locations are being put out to the ISPs to submit their new availability data. So you won't see those in those new locations in the map. Yet, if you're a license holder to the underlying data, which some localities would be you can see them outside of the map. But at some point in the spring, the FCC will push those new locations into the map. And before June 30, and you'll see them reflected in the version of the map on which we use to base our allocations in June.

Ryan Johnston 11:21

Okay, wonderful. So, we've been talking a lot about getting challenges in continually. With you guys make your allocations on the 30th of June, what resources are available out there for local leaders, from the NTIA for these these localities that want to get involved.

Sarah Morris 11:45

So there's lots of resources both for NTIA and on the FCC website, we're getting involved in the map. But I think more broadly, it's important to note that in our Notice of Funding Opportunity, the big document for the bead program that guides the get provides all the rules and rules of the road for how to engage with the program. We placed a really heavy emphasis on local engagement and coordination.

Sarah Morris 12:14

So while it's true that the money flows, the way that the the Congress designed the bead program is that it's a bulk formula based allocation to the states and then the state's set up their program

for dispersing funds to sub grantees. In the process of award making those sub grantee awards, we expect the states to do meaningful, ongoing, robust engagement with local stakeholders, whether it's city leaders, city and community leaders, other stakeholders on the ground, nonprofits, etc, doing work within the community. And this is designed to be a process that reflects actual needs actual perspective, this is not a box checking exercise. And so I really encourage local leaders to to take us up on that charge, and to reach out to the state broadband offices to the extent that they haven't already. And think about ways in which they can they can engage.

Sarah Morris 13:27

I'll pause there if you have follow up questions.

Ryan Johnston 13:33

Sure. What would be the role of NTIA federal program officers in kind of helping to build that bridge?

Sarah Morris 13:41

Great question, Ryan. So NTIA is doing something sort of new with this grant program. We've brought on almost one to one, there's still a few hires that are in the pipeline, but we're getting really close. A federal program officer for every hour or two in a couple of states. A federal program officer who wakes up every Tuesday in the state wakes up every day thinking how can I help this state succeed in meeting the goals of the beat and digital equity programs. These these are folks, they are not sitting in an office like I am in DC, they are on the ground, engaging with local leaders and stakeholders and liaising with the state broadband offices. And they are a really good resource for navigating the complexities of the program and making sure that folks are plugged into the right places. So, you know, to the extent that there are technical assistance opportunities happening on the ground or community engagement events, the federal program officer can be that good link to make sure that that folks are really meeting the goals set forth in the NOFO around community and local engagement.

Ryan Johnston 14:57

Gotcha. That's actually that's wonderful to hear. We've had several interactions with the federal program officers in Philadelphia and Colorado. I know we're hosting a meet and greet with some of them from Oregon and Washington coming up soon here. So the work that they're doing is absolutely invaluable. We are so happy that we have been able to kind of rub elbows with them as they've been doing a lot of this really important on the ground work.

Sarah Morris 15:23

I'd be remiss, Ryan, if I didn't point out that if you don't, if you're listening, and you don't know who your federal program officer is there, if you go to the internet for all.gov website, which is the hub for all of our information at NTIA about our federal grant programs, and the federal grant programs for our sister, Oregon, its sister agencies and departments. There's a state map that that you can click through and see who the see the contact information at the state broadband office and the FPO for your particular state. So it's a great resource. It's it's a interactive, nice visual map that folks can can visit.

Ryan Johnston 15:59

Yeah, it is very nice. And it does work very well. But as we're kind of trying to see what these you know, what comes out of these strategic partnerships from the state and localities? I guess, in your opinion, what would the resources that ;ocalities could bring to their states, that would probably be the most helpful to them, as they're working to put together their, their grant applications.

Sarah Morris 16:28

So anything that reflects the the local realities on the ground, this can be true of workforce needs, does the community have the capacity to build these networks and make sure that these networks function effectively, are the there'll be, in addition to the FCC IDs mapping challenge process, as part of the state's process, once they get their allocation, they're going to the States are gonna have to figure out where they direct these funds to within the states. And they'll have more they'll have to use they should use the FCC maps as a starting place. But in the NOFO, we've created a lot more flexibility for states to contextualize the the availability findings in the FCC map with with additional data, so local community leaders, local and community and state and city leaders can be an important resource in helping this the state navigate how to structure those programs and help provide that contextual data to understand where those needs exist on the ground.

Ryan Johnston 17:33

Gotcha. Well, that's really everything that I have. I guess my last question would be, is there anything else that localities should know, or be thinking about as, as we're moving forward through this process?

Sarah Morris 17:46

You know, just building on what we've been discussing Ryan, I think, be inclusive and over communicate with with your appeals, but also with with NTIA, you know, with me, with whomever else that's working on these various issues. We want to be responsive, and we want the decisions that we're making to reflect input from a wide variety of stakeholders. So we want to hear from you.

Sarah Morris 18:14

And we want to make sure that states are being true to the requirements in the NOFO, about local engagement and coordination. And so if you're running into hurdles, engaging as part of those plans, let us know, let your FPO know, and, and we'll we'll do what we can to make sure that that that meaningful engagement is happening.

Ryan Johnston 18:38

And I will I'll just tack on that anything for all of those listening. If you don't have access to the information for the FPOs, if you can't find it, or have access to it, or don't necessarily have the ability to get in touch with Sarah, directly. We here at NCC are happy to act as that intermediary. So please don't hesitate to reach out to me as well with any of that. But thank you for being here today Sarah I really appreciate the discussion that we've had and all of the information that you've shared. Thank you so much.

Ryan Johnston 19:11

You're muted.

Sarah Morris 19:12

Of course, it wouldn't be a zoom call if I didn't end if I if I ended without having an unmute moment. Thank you, Ryan. It's been a pleasure to be here. Happy to come back. Happy to talk maps at any time happy to talk feature the programs at anytime. So thanks for having me. Thank you