

# Anthony, NM 'bootcamp' aims to equip advocates to solve internet gaps

## Session to offer community toolkit for accessing grants

SOUTHERN NEW MEXICO - Hundreds of millions of dollars in new federal funding for high-speed internet upgrades could be coming to New Mexico from a significant wave of pandemic relief funding. But will communities have the right expertise to access it?

Some broadband advocates have expressed concerns that areas most in need of internet upgrades and digital access -- like low-income, rural or unincorporated communities — could be left even further behind because they're not advocating for themselves or don't have the right knowledge to pursue grants that could help close widespread digital divides across Southern New Mexico.

It's a challenge state broadband officials are hoping to counter next week by hosting two info sessions for community leaders, local elected officials, nonprofits, advocates and other decision-makers who are expected to play key roles in helping their areas solve connectivity gaps.

The first session is Wednesday, June 28 at the Doña Ana Community College campus in Anthony, New Mexico, and the second is Thursday, June 29 at the Pueblo of Tesuque, just north of Santa Fe. The events run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

## Shedding light on the funding process

The sessions will give an overview of broadband issues so attendees can “develop effective programs,” said Alison Riley, spokesperson for the New Mexico Office of Broadband Access and Expansion.

“It will demystify every step of the process in terms of getting broadband to local communities,” she said.

The “Let’s Get Going Broadband Bootcamps” are open to anyone interested in broadband upgrades and digital skill building, state officials said. There are capacity limits due to building spaces, according to the registration website. And the broadband office will prioritize attendance by “local community members and small local teams eager to learn together, mobilizing locally for connectivity, and/or building a community coalition,” per the website.

Kelly Schlegel, director of the New Mexico Office of Broadband Access and Expansion, said the sessions are meant to equip advocates with what they need to know, answering questions like: “How do I get going? How do I get everybody energized? How do I put together a plan? How do I put together a network design?” They’ll also explain how to apply for funding, the process of issuing a request for proposals (RFP), and creating an agreement called an MOU to form partnerships.

“We try to be there for the toolkits and the advice and the coaching,” she said in an interview with KRWG News. “And then, when they get together and come up with a plan, we can even give them our engineers to give them a network design.”

## Communities tasked with asking for support

The bootcamps follow on the heels of a series of input meetings the state hosted on broadband problems in recent weeks. Riley said the upcoming sessions will be more in-depth than the earlier meetings and will include a series of presentations.

"We're going to leave a lot of time in between all of these sessions for Q and A," she said. "At the end of the day, there's going to be a large Q and A session. We're also offering the opportunity for individual consultations."

In the months ahead, it will be up to communities to pitch their requests for internet project funding to the state broadband office, which will evaluate them.

"We look for strong financials; We look for good network design," Schlegel said. "We look for good sustainability. And then, we grant the funds if we pick them and we meet the criteria."

Riley said state officials share in the concern that communities could be skipped over in future funding awards if they lack the know-how to successfully apply, which is the reason for the bootcamps. There's a chance more bootcamp sessions could be added to the calendar, based upon demand, she said.

The Institute for Local Self Reliance is hosting the bootcamps on behalf of the broadband office, state officials said. The organization describes itself as a "national research and advocacy organization that partners with allies across the country to build an American economy driven by local priorities and accountable to people and the planet."

The broadband office is asking that residents pre-register for the events because refreshments and lunch will be served. Sign up here:

<http://connect.nm.gov/lets-get-going-bootcamps.html>

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