

NM broadband office seeks \$70M for satellite expansion

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The office responsible for coordinating the expansion of broadband internet service across New Mexico has presented a \$70 million budget request to lawmakers ahead of the 2024 legislative session.

Drew Lovelace, the acting director of the two-year-old state Office of Broadband Access and Expansion, appeared before the Legislative Finance Committee at a hearing in Santa Fe on Nov. 19. The committee's vice chair is state Rep. Nathan Small, D-Las Cruces.

Lovelace outlined several initiatives and funding requests, including \$35

million to continue an affordable connectivity program that had lost federal funding and \$80 million to support efforts to build broadband infrastructure. In all, Lovelace said \$2 billion would be needed overall for a system including fiberoptic installation, last-mile and middle-mile connectivity and 5G cellular service.

Lovelace said the \$70 million request would fund an initiative dubbed "Accelerate Connect NM," seeking to connect households with inadequate internet service, or none, with high-speed satellite internet service.

Lovelace told lawmakers on the committee that the program would connect approximately 100,000 residents to broadband service until other technologies, such as fiberoptic cable or fixed wireless connections, were in service.

He told lawmakers that program would also help households afford the more expensive satellite connections by providing subsidies aiming to bring the monthly cost down to around \$90.

The office considers households with access to 25 megabits-per-second for download and 3mbps for upload speed, or less, as "unserved," and 100mbps and 20 mbps for download and upload speeds, and below, are "underserved," the office explained in a news release. The program would extend as many as 95,000 vouchers for needed hardware in addition to the subsidies for service.

The Accelerate Connect NM funds would be nonrecurring; however, Lovelace urged the lawmakers to think beyond short-term funding measures, since permitting for a project alone can take two years, and an entire project may span five.

"Broadband is infrastructure," Lovelace told the committee. "These are long-

term projects that require rights of way, permitting, environmental – and that can be two years unto itself. My big ask coming out of this is that we no longer get 1- and 2-year appropriations; that we look at 3- to 5-year appropriations, and we make sure that we can do the entire grant cycle and that we don't jeopardize the projects that we're trying (to build)."

Lovelace also presented on other matters pertaining to the two-year-old office's budget and staffing. The office, which manages \$1 billion in state and federal funding for broadband, is seeking a \$650,000 increase to its current operating budget of \$2,388,700, with the added funding supporting additional staff. The office is organized under New Mexico's Department of Information Technology.

In a written statement, Lovelace said, "All of New Mexico should have high-speed internet. 'Accelerate Connect NM' will be vital to achieving inclusivity for rural homes and businesses. This program ensures New Mexicans are not on the wrong side of the digital divide for the next few years while longer-term projects are built."