

Memo

To: State broadband offices

From: Jake Varn, The Pew Charitable Trusts

Date: November 4, 2021

Subject: Broadband Grant Program – Scoring Metrics

The following memo includes information on broadband grant scoring metrics, with side-by-side comparisons of the metrics used by Indiana, Minnesota, and Virginia. These three states represent both relatively well-established state broadband grant programs (Minnesota, in particular) as well as programs that updated their scoring systems in 2020 and 2021.

Summary Points

- The scoring metrics for evaluating grant applications can be a tool to promote and enforce state priorities.
- State grant programs use different point scales for scoring grant applications. For example, Minnesota uses a 120-point scale, Indiana uses a 250-point scale, and Virginia uses a 300-point scale. For comparative purposes, the below examples include the equivalent percentage of points awarded per category.
- Each program emphasizes different components in its scoring of applications, based on state priorities:
 - Virginia awards up to 135 points (45%) for the applicant’s project budget and cost appropriateness. This includes up to 125 points for a cost-benefit index calculated by using the total amount of Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI) funding requested and the total number of serviceable units.
 - Minnesota places a greater emphasis on speed and the overall change in level of service available. See below for a table on Minnesota’s scoring rubric with a sliding scale of points available depending on current speeds, speeds after the build, and the total number of passings (up to 20 points or 17%).
 - Indiana places a greater emphasis on the match contributed by applicants and utilizes a sliding scale of up to 65 points (26%) for projects with a higher cost match, with applicants offering to cover more than 75% of the cost receiving the maximum points.
- States may also incorporate other priorities into grant scoring. For example, several states award points for digital equity, affordability, adoption efforts, or for specific priority populations (e.g., Indiana awards up to 15 points [6%] for the inclusion of “Economically Disadvantaged Student Household Service Packages”). Virginia’s “Commonwealth Priorities” category allows for a flexible awarding for projects that align particularly well with the agency’s goals and directives.

- States can prioritize policy goals either by including them in the scoring rubric or by addressing them through screening eligibility requirements or a subsequent review phase following the application scoring process (i.e., if the final grant selection process is conducted by a board or commission, as in Colorado and Wisconsin). States can also reference these priorities as a component of a category on their scoring rubric.
- Notably, the potential impact of a state grant program’s scoring process may be limited by a need to classify areas that have received past federal or state funding as ineligible for grant funds. While this can serve as a protection against “overbuilding” or for complying with federal requirements, projects funded through these previous programs may offer service at inadequate speeds and census block-level analysis may overrepresent the actual level of coverage.

Example Scoring Rubrics

States frequently use scoring rubrics to screen grant applicants and award projects that align with the state’s policy priorities. The Minnesota [Border to Border Broadband Development Grant Program](#) utilizes a 120-point scale to rank applicants. The [VATI program](#) in Virginia follows a 300-point evaluation criteria formula. In Indiana, the [Next Level Connections Broadband grant](#) program uses a 250-point scale. The precise weights of the scored categories are often adjusted between rounds to better reflect the state’s priorities and applicant pool.

Common scoring categories include:

- Project description.
- Level of service (or total number of households/businesses/anchor institutions to be served by the proposed project).
- Project readiness.
- Community engagement.
- Affordability and/or adoption assistance.
- Speeds.
- Matching cost-share.

Select Scoring Categories Comparison

Project Description

This category can be used to evaluate a variety of application components, including the overall scope of the project, the technologies used, and the parties involved. States may also include features such as project readiness, speeds and pricing tiers, and budgetary components in this general category, if those aspects are not separately scored.

Indiana	Minnesota	Virginia
Share of points: 26%	Share of points: 42%	Share of points: 28%
<p>[Indiana scores the <i>project description</i> and <i>project readiness</i> in a single category]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree to which the proposed technology solution and the project area are clearly described; including justification of a technology solution that does not deliver or cannot be scaled to at least 100/100 speeds and the geographical, topographical, or excessive costs justifications of not delivering scalable 100/100 speeds. • Sufficiency of detail in the application to assess whether the proposed solution is logical and capable of achieving the project goals. • Degree to which the task descriptions are clear, detailed, timely, and reasonable, resulting in a high likelihood that the proposed scope of work will succeed in meeting the project goals. • Identification of key execution risks and mitigation plan. • Initial five-year service (speed tiers and pricing) offered at or above speed stated in the application at affordable prices, including unbundled broadband service. • Demonstration of overall project readiness. Examples include sound engineering 	<p>[Minnesota’s Project Readiness (21%) and Project Sustainability (21%) are the most applicable comparative categories]</p> <p><i>Project Readiness</i> Applicant has concretely demonstrated a comprehensive knowledge of—and detailed preparation for—the proposed project. Applicant has provided evidence of being fully prepared to build, implement, and operate the project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All budget material is provided in detailed yet clearly understandable manner, sources and uses of funds are realistic, all grant eligible elements are included, all funding partners are secured. • Other broadband infrastructure requirements are included—certified engineering design and diagrams, documentation of scalable equipment, and all preconstruction requirements are identified and included in the project schedule. • Project implementation requirements are provided: proposed speed tiers and service pricing, five-year service commitment, and proposed marketing strategies. • Complete project schedule and financial requirements are provided. 	<p>Category: Project Description and Need Describe the fundamentals of the project, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of the project area and how it was determined. • Internet speeds to be offered. • Network design. • How the project achieves universal broadband coverage in a locality, or how a project fits into a larger plan for universal broadband coverage. <p><i>Note: Applicants will achieve maximum scoring in this section only if the application reaches universal coverage in the county or counties included in the application.</i></p>

<p>and design plan, secured financing, permits and/or approvals secured or in place, thorough and complete project schedule and tasks, and evidence of readiness to build, manage, and operate the project.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed engineering design and project area map. Details regarding the technology, design, and network routes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Clear, detailed boundaries of project area with passings indicated. ○ Census blocks clearly marked in project areas. ○ Clear, detailed network route map that is consistent with route miles. ○ Technology specifications that clearly indicate purported speeds and network indicators can be met. ○ Vendor details (for new technologies). ○ Note: Professional Engineering certification is required as a threshold factor. 	<p><i>Project Sustainability</i></p> <p>Applicant has demonstrated strong internal capacity to effectively support and sustain its broadband infrastructure proposal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstration of technical expertise—specific prior experience in providing broadband services. • Organizational support evidence provided—extent of organization and how organizational strength will sustain broadband service delivery and maintenance. • Financial statements provided—most current year’s audited financial statements and supporting documentation where applicable, to demonstrate overall financial viability. 	
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Community Engagement

This category is used to evaluate the level of support or engagement from the community that will be served by the funded project. States evaluate this through letters or other demonstrations of support from community members, alignment with local or regional plans, and formal commitments, including financial commitments from local governments or community partners.

Indiana	Minnesota	Virginia
Share of points: 6%	Share of points: 12.5%	Share of points: 0%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the project supports the program objectives and previous broadband planning efforts in the proposed project area. • Degree to which project fits into an existing community strategic plan. • Recent survey data that covers broad spectrum of community with statistically meaningful results regarding level of need, gaps, and project support. • Evidence of community support and demonstration of community engagement. This may include, but is not limited to, personalized letters of support, attendance at events/meetings demonstrating community engagement at-large, and planning/organizing events for community members; and engagement with stakeholders outside of the project team, which may include residents, businesses, community leaders, project partners, elected officials, and community broadband task forces, etc. • Degree to which project will include local hires and provide opportunities for local hires such as apprenticeship programs, job fairs, and training programs. 	<p>Additional scoring points will be awarded for the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verified financial commitment to the project from any qualified community partner(s) [Community partner may be any public, private, nonprofit, or philanthropic entity—this would include a business, county, township, city, tribal entity, or community coalition]. • Projects that propose to serve or partially serve federally recognized tribal lands, and the associated tribal entity has provided documentation of project support. • Applications that provide substantive evidence of community support for the project. <p>Note: Minnesota also includes a separate category of “Economic Development & Community Impact Review” with up to 12.5% of points awarded for identifying and incorporating businesses, agriculture customers, health and public safety locations, and anchor institutions within the proposed project area.</p>	<p>Virginia does not award points for community engagement. However, the program requires applicants be public-private partnerships between a unit of government and a private sector internet service provider.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to sustain the project for a minimum of five years. 		
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Affordability and/or Adoption Assistance

This category rewards applicants that have committed to providing service at an affordable rate (as defined by the state’s criteria or at the agency’s discretion), or that have included a plan or dedicated resources to increasing adoption, including through digital literacy programs and community outreach.

Indiana	Minnesota	Virginia
Share of points: 6%	Share of points: 8%	Share of points: 13%
<p>[Indiana includes affordability in the “Project Description and Readiness” category with the bullet: “Initial five-year service (speed tiers and pricing) offered at or above speed stated in the application at affordable prices, including unbundled broadband service” along with the “Economically Disadvantaged Student Household Service Packages” category listed below.]</p> <p><i>Economically Disadvantaged Student Household Service Packages</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service offerings and price points reflected to meet the unique needs of economically disadvantaged student households and their affordability levels. • Upload speeds that reflect unique circumstances of increased remote learning. • Special rates and discounts for devices that enable remote learning. • Offerings that enable the purchase of unbundled internet at reasonable price points without obligations. 	<p>Broadband Adoption Assistance Additional scoring points will be awarded for the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are broadband adoption activities planned for project? • Will technical support or training on broadband be offered? • Is there—or will there be—a low-income broadband assistance program offering? 	<p>[Virginia includes affordability within its “Commonwealth Priorities” category.]</p> <p><i>Commonwealth Priorities</i> Describe how the project would reflect priorities of the Commonwealth, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passings of significant impact. • Unique partnerships involved in the project. • Digital equity efforts. • Capacity for scalability. <p>Note: Digital equity efforts to ensure low-to-moderate income households in the proposed project area will have affordable access to speeds at or above 25/3 Mbps.</p>

Speed

This category is used to award points to projects that will achieve certain speeds or go beyond the minimum speed requirement of the grant program. Projects that can be scaled to higher speeds in the future, particularly fiber, can be rewarded with additional points in this category as “future-proof” investments that will meet expected future demands. Projects without scalable speeds may require additional state funds to upgrade and remain sufficient. This category may also include pricing requirements, and augment or serve as substitute for an affordability category.

Indiana	Minnesota	Virginia
Share of points: 24%	Share of points: 17%	Share of points: 3%
See table below.	See table below.	<p>[Virginia includes speed as a subcategory of the “Project Description” category.]</p> <p>Describe the internet service offerings, including download and upload speeds, to be provided after completion of the proposed project. Detail whether that speed is based on dedicated or shared bandwidth, and detail the technology that will be used. This description can be illustrated by a map or schematic diagram, as appropriate. List the private co-applicant’s tiered price structure for all speed offerings in the proposed project area, including the lowest tiered speed offering at or above 25/3 Mbps (up to 10 points).</p>

Indiana speed points for households, businesses, and anchor institutions passed

# of passings	Download speed after build				
	10 Mbps	50 Mbps	100 Mbps	500 Mbps	1 Gbps
1 - 50	0	3	6	17	30
51 - 250	1	4	10	20	34
251 - 500	2	5	14	24	37
501+	3	6	17	27	40

# of passings	Upload speed after build				
	5 Mbps	20 Mbps	100 Mbps	500 Mbps	1 Gbps
1 - 50	0	1	4	8	15
51 - 250	0	2	5	10	16
251 - 500	1	3	6	11	18
501+	1	4	8	13	20

Minnesota’s Anticipated Broadband Improvements Scoring Table

# of passings	Speed now:	0/0 Mbps	≤10/1 Mbps	0/0 Mbps	≤10/1 Mbps	25/3 Mbps	0/0 Mbps	≤25/3 Mbps	<100/20 Mbps
	Speed after build:	25/3 Mbps	25/3 Mbps	100/20 Mbps	100/20 Mbps	100/20 Mbps	1Gbps/1Gbps	1Gbps/1G	1G/1Gbps
0-50	Points awarded:	14	10	16	14	12	18	15	13
51-499		15	11	17	15	13	19	16	14
500+		16	12	18	16	14	20	17	15

Matching Cost-Share

This category is often used to reward applicants that can cover a higher percentage of the project’s total costs, and therefore require less in state funding. However, an overreliance on this category may disadvantage economically distressed communities and smaller providers that lack the financial resources of wealthier communities and larger providers.

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Share of points: 26%	Share of points: 12%	Share of points: 45%																								
<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Match percent of eligible project costs</th> <th>Points</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>35 to 49%</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>50 to 59%</td> <td>30</td> </tr> <tr> <td>60 to 69%</td> <td>40</td> </tr> <tr> <td>70 to 75%</td> <td>50</td> </tr> <tr> <td>>75%</td> <td>65</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Match percent of eligible project costs	Points	35 to 49%	0	50 to 59%	30	60 to 69%	40	70 to 75%	50	>75%	65	<p>Percent of state grant request compared to total eligible project costs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applicant matching funds of 55% or more will result in a higher application score for this category. Any funding partner contributions are included in applicant matching funds for points. <p>Grant Funding Request Amount Scoring Table</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Percent of eligible project costs requested</th> <th>Points</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>30% or less</td> <td>10</td> </tr> <tr> <td>31 to 35%</td> <td>8</td> </tr> <tr> <td>36 to 40%</td> <td>5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>41 to 45%</td> <td>3</td> </tr> <tr> <td>46 to 50%</td> <td>0</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Percent of eligible project costs requested	Points	30% or less	10	31 to 35%	8	36 to 40%	5	41 to 45%	3	46 to 50%	0	<p>Category: Project Budget and Cost-Appropriateness</p> <p>Describe the project budget, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detailed project budget, including derivation of costs and documentation of cost estimates, delineated by each service area. Information to calculate the cost benefit index score. Number of serviceable units passed and the breakdown of those passings. Breakdown of matching funds and in-kind resources.
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