

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 19, 2023

The Honorable Xochitl Torres Small
Under Secretary for Rural Development
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Under Secretary Torres Small,

Thank you for joining me last month in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, to discuss work taking place at the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Development (USDA RD) office to address broadband challenges faced by rural communities.

Vermont stakeholders at our broadband roundtable discussed specific challenges accessing two important USDA programs supporting broadband deployment—the ReConnect Loan and Grant Program and the Community Connect Grant Program. I ask for your partnership in addressing these challenges, including through the Farm Bill reauthorization process:

- **ReConnect Program:** Program requirements pertaining to the physical distance served, which do not consider topography, have limited Vermont’s access to this program. These requirements tend to favor rural areas that are flatter and more widespread over areas like Vermont that are smaller, denser, and more mountainous, where topography is more of a barrier than distance.
- **Community Connect:** The program requirement that all addresses in a proposed service area lack access to 25 Mbps/3 Mbps speeds for wired and wireless broadband can bar certain rural areas from accessing the program if they have strong cell connections scattered through the proposed service area or include a small number of households that have 25/3 connection speeds.

Stakeholders offered suggestions for expanding access to these programs, including more predictability within the ReConnect Program to allow for better planning, more USDA-led information sessions for stakeholders on implementation and reporting for ReConnect grants, and a percentage-based access-to-speed standard to qualify for Community Connect rather than an all-encompassing maximum threshold requirement.

The ReConnect Program has awarded \$3.13 billion in grant funding across at least 43 states and territories since it was established in 2018.¹ USDA awarded \$160 million to 26 states between

¹ Congressional Research Service, “USDA’s ReConnect Program: Expanding Rural Broadband” (online at www.crs.gov/Reports/R47017?source=search, pg. 11-12).

fiscal years 2013 and 2021 through the Community Connect Program, funding 80 grants impacting more than 100,000 rural residents.²

Yet despite these investments, nationally, more than 33.1% of Americans in rural areas lack access to fixed terrestrial broadband at speeds of 100 Mbps/10 Mbps, compared to only 2.2% of Americans in urban areas.³ In Vermont, 18.6% of residents lack access to 25/3 service, while 65.5% lack access to the high-quality, high-speed broadband service speeds of 100/100 Mbps.⁴

In order to ensure USDA has the tools, flexibilities, and resources it needs to address the challenges described above and meet the broadband buildout needs of rural communities, I inquire for answers to the following questions no later than May 5, 2023:

1. What additional statutory flexibilities or tools, if any, does USDA need to address the broadband challenges raised at the roundtable, including expanding access to the ReConnect and Community Connect programs?
2. Does USDA RD support 100/100 symmetrical broadband buildout speeds for the ReConnect Program?
3. What authorization levels for the ReConnect and Community Connect programs will be sufficient to meet current demand among rural communities?
4. What additional flexibilities and authorities related to coordination among various federal departments such as the Federal Communications Commission and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, would USDA find helpful to meet the needs of rural communities?

Access to broadband in the digital 21st century economy is not a luxury for rural communities; it is a necessity. I value the strong partnership USDA RD has had with Vermont and look forward to ongoing discussions with you and your staff to make the promise of these programs a reality for rural Americans.

Sincerely,



Peter Welch
United States Senator

² United States Department of Agriculture, “Community Connect Grant Award| Application Fiscal Years 2013-2021” (online at www.rd.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2013-2021_ccillustration_update_02232022.pdf).

³ Federal Communications Commission, “2021 Broadband Deployment Report”, January 2021, (online at <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-21-18A1.pdf>, pg. 24).

⁴ Vermont Department of Public Service, “Broadband High-Speed Internet Availability in Vermont”, November 2022 (online at <https://publicservice.vermont.gov/telecommunications-and-connectivity/broadband-high-speed-internet-availability-vermont>).