ORS Completes CARES Act Broadband Initiatives, Expanding Internet Access During COVID-19

The South Carolina Office of Regulatory Staff (ORS) successfully completed the administration of Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security or "CARES Act" funds to help expand broadband access in South Carolina. Through the Online Learning Initiative, Broadband Infrastructure Program, and mapping and planning efforts, many South Carolinians now have access to reliable, high-speed broadband internet to enhance distance learning, telehealth, and other needs.

The $2.2 trillion CARES Act was passed by Congress to help provide relief to the United States economy from the COVID-19 pandemic. The accelerateSC task force played a vital role in the safe and swift revitalization of our state's economy following COVID-19. One important charge given to accelerateSC was to determine the best use of the CARES Act funds that were directed to South Carolina. They were also tasked with providing recommendations to the Governor for the $1.9 billion Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) included in the CARES Act. As a result of those efforts, the South Carolina General Assembly passed Act 142 authorizing the ORS to expend up to $50 million for broadband initiatives related to COVID-19.
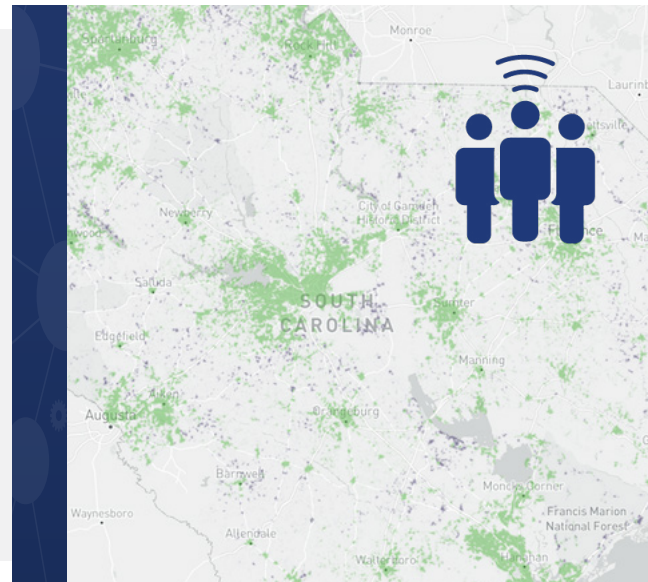
Online Learning Initiative

The Online Learning Initiative procured over 100,000 mobile hotspots and wired internet service for qualifying student households in school districts and institutions of higher learning statewide. The ORS collaborated with more than 115 schools across the state to distribute devices and provide broadband access to eligible households through December 31, 2020. On December 31, 2020, remaining funds transferred to the South Carolina Department of Education to manage the program's service through June 2021.

Mapping and Planning

The ORS launched the state's Broadband Map in December 2020, creating an accessible platform for the public to see where broadband is – and isn't – available in South Carolina. The ORS requested all broadband service providers operating in South Carolina to submit data and information on the availability of broadband service at delivered download and upload speeds and by technology type for each address in the state the provider can serve. CostQuest Associates, Inc., was then hired to perform the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) work that included address-specific data from the majority of South Carolina's internet providers. The ORS has contracted the SC Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office for the continuing storage, security, and maintenance of the map.
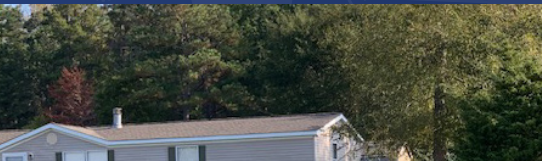
Broadband Infrastructure Program

The Broadband Infrastructure Program helped to expand broadband access to almost 20,000 structures in the state. The ORS launched the program in August 2020 by engaging Revolution D, Inc. to identify priority areas of the state that were unserved, impacted by COVID-19, and that if broadband were available, would support distance learning, telehealth, and/or teleworking. The ORS funded approximately 80 applications for projects in 27 counties across the state. Until completion, companies were required to report on progress of their projects to the ORS. Fourteen companies completed infrastructure projects in December 2020, helping to expand broadband availability to homes, businesses, educational institutions, and health-care facilities in South Carolina.

Allendale Pilot Project

The ORS also partnered with SCETV, USC Salkehatchie, Allendale County School District, the Allendale Hampton Jasper Regional Library, and Revolution D, Inc. to launch a pilot program allowing free Wi-Fi to students and/or the public together with residential broadband service in Allendale County. Project partners worked with Palmetto Rural Telephone Cooperative to get fiber backhaul and Dominion Energy to get electricity to the SCETV towers located in Allendale County. Equipment was installed on the towers that will provide approximately 1,000 residents with fixed wireless (citizen broadband radio service) access to broadband service.

Questions?

Broadband Information
CARESAct@ORS.SC.GOV

More information can be found at ORS.SC.GOV/broadband