

NTIA Seeks Volunteers to Review Broadband Applications

Grant Gross, IDG News Service

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The U.S. National Telecommunications and Information Administration, scheduled to distribute US\$4.7 billion in broadband deployment grants over the next 15 months, will count on volunteers to review grant applications.

The NTIA, in a [document](#) released this week, asks for people to apply to become volunteer reviewers of the broadband grants. The NTIA's broadband grant program is part of \$7.2 billion that the U.S. Congress approved for broadband in a huge economic stimulus package approved earlier this year.

"As a reviewer, your evaluations will be an important factor considered by NTIA in determining whether to award grant funding," the NTIA document said.

It's "a little scary" that volunteers will have the power to accept and reject broadband applications, said Craig Settles, an analyst and president of consulting firm Successful.com. Volunteers may have limited expertise, or they may have biases that aren't evident to the NTIA, he said.

"You're about to enter a competitive bidding process with millions of dollars at stake for your community," Settles wrote [on his blog](#). "I think you'd want the best people stimulus money can acquire influencing who the winners are. I feel it's a reach to expect the best people are going to volunteer for this gig."

A NTIA spokesman didn't immediately respond to a phone call and an e-mail seeking details about the volunteer program.

Volunteer reviewers will likely be working from home with "moderate supervision," Settles said. Volunteers will be required to attend a webinar orientation session and teleconference panel reviews, the NTIA said.

Volunteer reviewers will be required to have some connection to the broadband industry, although the volunteers will have to comply with rules from NTIA parent agency the U.S. Department of Commerce on conflicts of interest and confidentiality, the NTIA document said. Reviewers must have "significant expertise and experience" in either designing and building broadband networks, educating or training consumers about broadband, or working in programs to increase demand for broadband, the NTIA document said.

"So you take away the money, conflict of interest means you can't reap the future rewards, why would you do this?" Settles said. "And if the qualified folks don't do it, what are we left with? When was the last time you volunteered for jury duty -- or looked forward to being judged by the people who can't figure out how to escape jury duty?"

It's ironic that volunteers will be determining who gets economic stimulus money, Settles added. "When last I checked, this is a stimulus bill for creating paying jobs," he wrote. "How the heck can you justify asking people in a crappy economy to work for nothing on a jobs-creation project that has money budgeted to pay for the work these volunteers are being asked to do?"

Officials with the U.S. Rural Utilities Service (RUS), which will distribute the remaining \$2.5 billion in broadband stimulus money, told members of a congressional subcommittee Wednesday that they plan to hire additional staff and use contractors to review broadband grant and loan applications.