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Federal Grants and Loans for State and Local Emergency Communications Projects: Frequently Asked Questions

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June 1, 2018

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

R45213

Summary

Improving emergency communications has been an area of congressional interest for many years. Before September 11, 2001, Congress provided funding through grants, which could be used to improve state and local emergency communications through purchases of police and fire radios, construction of communication towers, and disaster planning, training, and exercises. After September 11, 2001, Congress increased funding to improve interoperability between public safety agencies at all levels of government to enhance communication and coordination during response.

Congress has also supported investments in broadband for public safety through several grant and loan programs, many focused on expanding broadband to rural areas. In 2012, Congress provided \$6.5 billion to create the First Responder Network (FirstNet), a new nationwide public safety broadband network. While this provides public safety agencies with a common platform to communicate, state, local, tribal, and territorial agencies may look to federal funding to equip responders with devices, and to enhance coverage.

As a result, many state and local public safety agencies are continually seeking out federal grant and loan funding for emergency communications. In the current portfolio of federal grants and loans that are available to state, local, tribal, and territorial entities, there are currently 22 programs that can support emergency communications projects. The programs fund different costs. For example, the programs may fund firefighter radios, border communications, 911 equipment, or broadband improvements. The costs may also change from year to year. For example, in 2018, several Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant programs can fund costs related to FirstNet. While program requirements fluctuate year over year, many state, local, territorial, and tribal entities have been able to use federal funding to improve emergency communications systems and enhance response.

These federal programs are sometimes difficult to access, primarily because they are administered by different federal departments and agencies, are released at different times each year, have complex application processes, and may be only briefly open to accept applications. For example, many of the 2018 FEMA grants that fund emergency communications are open for 30 days (from May 21, 2018 to June 20, 2018).

This report provides congressional staff with information on current federal grants and loans that fund emergency communications, information on the application process, eligible communications activities, and other resources they can provide to constituents seeking federal grant and loan funding to support emergency communications projects.

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What federal grants and loans¹ are available to support state and local emergency communications projects?

Congress provides funding through several grant and loan programs to state, local, tribal, and territorial entities that can be used to support emergency communications projects. These projects include police and fire department radio systems, communication towers, equipment for 911 centers, and non-equipment expenses such as communications planning, training, and exercises.

The Emergency Communications Preparedness Center (ECPC), a federal interagency working group focused on improving emergency communications across all levels of government, has published a list of federal grants and loans that fund emergency communications.² The *List of Federal Financial Assistance Programs Funding Emergency Communications* provides basic information on each federal grant or loan funding emergency communications including the federal department or agency administering the grant or loan, program description, eligible applicants, grant deadline, and link to each grant program's website. State, local, tribal, and territorial entities seeking federal grant or loan funds can review the list to determine which programs may best fit their emergency communications projects.

- The *List of Federal Financial Assistance Programs Funding Emergency Communications* can be found at <https://www.dhs.gov/safecom/funding>.

What kinds of emergency communication activities do federal grants and loans fund?

Federal grants and loans fund a variety of activities, including emergency communication equipment (e.g., radio systems, broadband improvements, 911 equipment) and non-equipment expenses (e.g., communications planning, training, exercises). However, all grants and loans do not fund the same activities. For example, some grants and loans fund construction of towers while others do not. Some fund personnel while others do not. Entities interested in applying for federal funding can review each grant or loan carefully to determine if the program will fund their proposed activities.

The *List of Federal Financial Assistance Programs Funding Emergency Communications* provides a basic program description that includes examples of activities that each program funds. For more detailed information on allowable costs, entities can click on the link to the program website, which is provided in the *List*.

- The *List of Federal Financial Assistance Programs Funding Emergency Communications* can be found at <https://www.dhs.gov/safecom/funding>.

Entities can also review the most recent grant notice (sometimes called a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) or a solicitation) for a list of eligible costs. NOFOs can be found on the federal grant clearinghouse, Grants.gov. Grants.gov houses all federal grant notices, provides resources for grantees, and serves as the application portal for many federal grants.

- The federal grant clearinghouse, Grants.gov, can be found at <http://www.grants.gov>.

¹ For definitions of grants and loans, see 2 C.F.R Part 200, Subpart A—Acronyms and Definitions at <https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/2/part-200/subpart-A>.

² For more information on the ECPC, see <https://www.dhs.gov/emergency-communications-preparedness-center>.

When are grant notices released?

Grant notices are typically released after appropriations are passed and signed into law, which varies from year to year. Knowing the date that the grant notice (or Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)) is released is important because for many grants, it is also the first day of the application period, and if the application period is limited (e.g., 30 days, 45 days), it provides the entity with more time to complete the application.

Some programs award funds annually; interested applicants may know when these grant notices will be released (e.g., 45 days after appropriations are signed into law), and may continually check program websites for the grant release notice. Other entities sign up for email alerts that will notify the entity when a particular grant notice has been released.

The federal agency that administers the grant may have an email alerting service that allows entities to subscribe and receive email alerts about the agency's program(s). For example, FEMA, which administers several grants that fund emergency communications, will send email alerts when grant notices are released. Entities interested in receiving federal funding are encouraged to sign up for program alerts, and social media alerts (e.g., Twitter) through the grant or loan program's website that is provided on the *List of Federal Financial Assistance Programs Funding Emergency Communications*.

- To set up email alerts through the federal granting agency, entities can click on the program links provided in the *List of Federal Financial Assistance Programs Funding Emergency Communications* at <https://www.dhs.gov/safecom/funding>, and look for subscription services or social media links.

Entities can also set up email alerts through the federal grant clearinghouse, Grants.gov, to receive notices on specific grants, including federal grant release dates and deadline dates.

- To set up email alerts on Grants.gov, individuals can go to the Grants.gov subscription page at <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/connect.html>.

Who can apply for federal grants and loans?

Eligibility requirements for federal grants and loans vary by program. Entities interested in applying for federal grant or loan funding can check the eligibility requirements *first*, before starting the application process. Entities not listed as eligible applicants cannot receive funding.

With federal grants and loans, it is important to understand who is eligible to *apply* and who is eligible to *receive* the funding. For some federal grants, localities can apply directly (i.e., the locality can apply for funding, and the locality can receive the funding). For other federal grants, the state is required to apply for funding on behalf of localities; the locality must submit its project proposal to the state, through a designated state agency (also known as a state administrative agency or SAA). The SAA decides with state officials whether the project will be included in the state's grant application. The SAA submits the state's grant application to the federal funding agency. If funds are awarded, the state passes the funds back to the localities for their projects. Entities seeking federal funding for emergency communications projects can:

- Review the *List of Federal Financial Assistance Programs Funding Emergency Communications* (<https://www.dhs.gov/safecom/funding>), select the program that best fits the project, and click on the link to the program's website to see eligibility requirements.
- Check the eligibility requirements for the program through the federal grants clearinghouse, Grants.gov at <https://www.grants.gov/>.

Which federal grants and loan programs can fund state, local, tribal, and territorial emergency communications projects?

FEMA administers several grant programs that can fund state, local, tribal, and territorial emergency communication projects,³ including communications-related planning, training, and exercises, and emergency communications equipment. These grant programs include the:

- Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG) which provides funding for state emergency management agencies;
- State Homeland Security Program (SHSP) which provides funding to states; 80% of the funds must be passed through to local or tribal units of government;
- Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) Grant Program which provides funding to states; 80% of the funds must be passed through to select high-risk urban areas;
- Operation Strongarden (OPSG) which provides funding to states; 100% of the funds must be passed through to the border community that was selected by FEMA through a competitive grant process;
- Port Security Grant Program (PSGP) which provides funding to states and local agencies that manage ports (e.g., port authorities);
- Transit Security Grant Program (TSGP) which provides funding to public transit agencies for preparedness and homeland security initiatives;
- Tribal Homeland Security Grant Program (THSGP) which provides funding for tribes to improve preparedness; and
- Assistance to Firefighter (AFG) grant program which provides funding to fire departments

For the grants where the state is the sole eligible applicant (e.g., SHSP, UASI, OPSG, EMPG), localities are to work with the designated state administrative agency (SAA) to submit a project for funding.

- For information on FEMA Grants, see <https://www.fema.gov/grants>
- For a list of SAAs in each state, see <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/28689>.

Also, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program can fund public safety communications planning, training, and equipment. The project must support one of JAG's many program areas (e.g., law enforcement, prosecution, crime prevention and education).⁴

- For information on the JAG Program, see <https://www.bja.gov/jag/>.

³ For more information on DHS/FEMA grants, see CRS Report R44669, *Department of Homeland Security Preparedness Grants: A Summary and Issues*, by Shawn Reese.

⁴ CRS In Focus IF10691, *The Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program*, by Nathan James.

Which federal grant and loan programs fund tribal emergency communications projects?

Tribal entities can receive funds through many of the grants and loans on the *List of Federal Financial Assistance Programs Funding Emergency Communications*. However, there are two grant programs targeted specifically to tribes.

The Tribal Homeland Security Grant Program, administered by FEMA, provides funding for tribal regions to strengthen preparedness; conduct emergency communications planning, training, exercises; and purchase equipment. Eligible applicants are federally-recognized tribes or a consortium of federally-recognized tribes. Tribal organizations may apply directly for this grant.

- For information on the Tribal Homeland Security Grant Program, see <https://www.fema.gov/tribal-homeland-security-grant-program>.

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Community Oriented Policing Services Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation (COPS/CTAS) also funds emergency communication projects specifically for tribal regions. Eligible applicants are federally-recognized tribes or a consortium of federally-recognized tribes. Tribal organizations may apply directly for this grant.

- For information on the DOJ Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation, see <https://cops.usdoj.gov/default.asp?Item=2489>.

Which federal grant and loan programs fund emergency communication improvements in urban areas?

Urban areas may receive funding through the State Homeland Security Program (SHSP), administered by FEMA. Urban areas are to work with the state to secure funds for its project, as the state is the sole eligible applicant under this grant program. Urban areas are to work with the designated state administrative agency (SAA) to submit a project for funding.

- For SHSP information: <https://www.fema.gov/homeland-security-grant-program>.
- For a list of SAAs in each state, see <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/28689>.

Additionally, FEMA's Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) provides funding to strengthen preparedness in select high-risk urban areas, conduct emergency communications planning, training, exercises, and purchase equipment. FEMA assesses the risk of applicants, and awards funding (mostly to major cities) based on risk. For this program, the SAA passes the funding through to the selected urban area.

- For information on the UASI Grant Program, see <https://www.fema.gov/fiscal-year-2017-homeland-security-grant-program>.
- For a list of SAAs in each state, see <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/28689>.

Which federal grant and loan programs fund emergency communications projects in rural areas?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has several grant and loan programs that can be used for communication projects in rural areas. For example, the Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program funds public safety communications projects. The Telecommunications Infrastructure Loans and Loan Guarantees Program can support 911 improvements and public safety broadband projects.

- For information on the Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program, see <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program>.
- For information on the Telecommunications Infrastructure Loans and Loan Guarantees, see <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/telecommunications-infrastructure-loans-loan-guarantees>.
- For additional assistance on these programs, entities can contact their State Rural Development Office at <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices>.

Which federal grant and loan programs can fund emergency communications projects in border regions?⁵

Border regions may receive funding through the State Homeland Security Program (SHSP), administered by FEMA. For these grants, localities are to work with the designated state administrative agency (SAA) to submit an emergency communications project for funding.

- For information on the State Homeland Security Program (SHSP) see <https://www.fema.gov/homeland-security-grant-program>.
- For a list of SAAs in each state, see <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/28689>.

Additionally, FEMA's Operation Stonegarden (OPSG) is a competitive grant awarded each year to border communities to strengthen coordination among border entities. Some communication activities and equipment are allowable under the program; the construction of towers is not. Only certain border states may apply. Localities interested in receiving OPSG funds are to work with the designated SAA to submit a project for funding.

- For information on Operation Stonegarden, including eligible areas, see <https://www.fema.gov/homeland-security-grant-program>.
- For a list of SAAs in each state, see <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/28689>.

⁵ The definition of "border region" may differ by how each agency defines them. Entities should review the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) to understand eligibility requirements.

Which federal grant and loan programs fund emergency communications projects for police departments?

Many grant programs administered FEMA fund emergency communication improvement projects for police departments, such as the State Homeland Security Program, the Urban Area Security Initiative, and the Tribal Homeland Security Grant Program. For most FEMA grants, the state is the sole eligible applicant. Local police departments are to work with the designated state administrative agency (SAA) to submit a project for funding.

- For information on FEMA grants, see <https://www.fema.gov/grants>.
- For a list of SAAs in each state, see <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/28689>.

The Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Justice, can fund public safety communications projects. Proposed projects must support a JAG program area (e.g., law enforcement, crime prevention and education).

- For information on JAG funding, see <https://www.bja.gov/jag/>.

Which federal grant and loan programs fund emergency communications projects for fire departments?

FEMA has several grant programs that fund emergency communications projects for fire departments, search and rescue teams, and emergency medical services (EMS), including the State Homeland Security Program, the Urban Area Security Initiative Grant Program, and the Tribal Homeland Security Grant Program. For these grants, the state is the sole eligible applicant. Local fire departments are to work with the designated state administrative agency (SAA) to submit a project for funding.

- For information on FEMA Grants, see <https://www.fema.gov/grants>.
- For a list of SAAs in each state, see <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/28689>.

FEMA's Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) Program focuses on improving capabilities of firefighters, which includes emergency communications capabilities (e.g., planning, training, equipment). The construction of towers is not allowed. For AFG grants, fire departments and EMS agencies must apply directly to FEMA.

- For more information on AFG grants, see <https://www.fema.gov/welcome-assistance-firefighters-grant-program>.

Which federal grant and loan programs fund 911 centers?

The National 911 Program Office created a list of grant programs that fund 911 activities and equipment.

- See https://www.911.gov/pdf/Federal_Financial_Assistance_Programs_Funding_Emergency_Communications_List_FY_2016.pdf.

A new 911 grant program (to be released in 2018) will fund improvements to 911 services.

- For more information, see https://www.911.gov/project_911grantprogram.html.

Which federal grant and loan fund emergency communications projects in hospitals and clinics?

The U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS) Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP) supports hospital and healthcare preparedness. This program can fund interoperable communications equipment, as well as integrated planning and coordination to enhance hospital readiness.

- For more information on the Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP), see <https://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/planning/hpp/Pages/default.aspx>

For rural areas, the Community Connect and Distance Learning and Telemedicine Programs, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, fund broadband improvements to community facilities, including hospitals and clinics, and connections to support telemedicine initiatives between emergency medical services (EMS) and healthcare facilities.

- For more information on the Community Connect Grant Program, see <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-connect-grants>.

For more information on the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Program, see <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/distance-learning-telemedicine-grants>.

- Entities interested in USDA grant and loan programs can contact their State Rural Development Office, available at <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices>.

Which federal grant and loan programs fund costs related to transitioning to the First Responder Network (FirstNet)?

FEMA administers several grant programs that can fund costs related to FirstNet,⁶ including the State Homeland Security Program (SHSP), Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) Grant Program, and Tribal Homeland Security Grant Program (THSGP).

FEMA funds can be used for personnel to assist with planning; integration planning; handheld broadband devices and accessories; vehicle-mounted broadband devices; network access devices (e.g., routers); broadband equipment that expands coverage or increases capacity; Subscriber Identification Modules (SIM) Cards; one-time purchase of subscription-based applications (e.g., mobile device management tools), and other related expenses.

FEMA requires that communication projects be coordinated with the Statewide Interoperability Coordinator (SWIC), and encourages coordination with the FirstNet State Single Point of Contact (SPOC). For SHSP and UASI, the state is the sole eligible applicant; for the THSGP, tribes may apply directly. Entities must work with the designated state administrative agency (SAA) to submit a project for funding.

- For information on FEMA Grants, see <https://www.fema.gov/grants>.
- For a list of SAAs in each state, see <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/28689>.
- A list of FirstNet SPOCs can be found at <https://firstnet.gov/consultation/spoc>.

⁶ FirstNet is the new nationwide public safety broadband network, created and funded in the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-96). For more information, see CRS Report R45179, *The First Responder Network (FirstNet) and Next-Generation Communications for Public Safety: Issues for Congress*, by Jill C. Gallagher.

What additional resources or guidance documents are available to help entities seeking federal funding for communications projects?

There are several guidance documents developed specifically for entities seeking federal funding for emergency communications projects.

- The *List of Federal Financial Assistance Programs Funding Emergency Communications* provides basic information on each federal grant or loan funding emergency communications. State, local, tribal, and territorial agencies seeking grant funds can review the *List* to determine which grant(s) may be the best fit for their communications project.
- *Funding Public Safety Communications Systems* provides information on various methods of funding (e.g., bonds, taxes, grants) that public safety agencies have used to support emergency communications projects. This document provides a step-by-step approach and best practices to use when applying for federal grants.
- The *SAFECOM Guidance on Emergency Communications Grants* provides recommendations for entities seeking federal grant funding for emergency communications including best practices, and guidance on technical standards that can be written into purchasing agreements, to promote interoperability.
- To access these documents, see <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/funding-documents>.

There are designated staff that can assist with federal grant and loan issues, including:

- Statewide Interoperability Coordinators (SWIC) who serve as the central coordination point on emergency communications in the states. Entities can contact the SWIC in their state to discuss the proposed emergency communications project, and to receive input on funding sources.
 - A list of SWICs can be found at <https://www.dhs.gov/safecom/ncswic-contact-information>.
- State Administrative Agencies (SAA) are state agencies designated to manage the federal grant application process. SAAs can provide assistance to localities interested in applying for federal grant and loan funding.
 - Entities interested in applying for FEMA grant funds can contact the SAA responsible for managing FEMA grants for the state. A list of SAAs can be found at <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/28689>.
 - Entities interested in applying for DOJ grant funds can contact the SAA responsible for managing DOJ grants for the state. A list of SAAs can be found at <http://ojp.gov/saa/index.htm>.
- The FEMA helpdesk can be reached at askcsid@dhs.gov or 1-800-368-6498.
- USDA State Rural Development Offices can provide assistance to entities interested in applying for USDA grant and loan funding. State offices and contact information is available at <https://www.rd.usda.gov/contact-us/state-offices>.
- Questions about 911 Grants can be directed to nhtsa.national911@dot.gov.

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