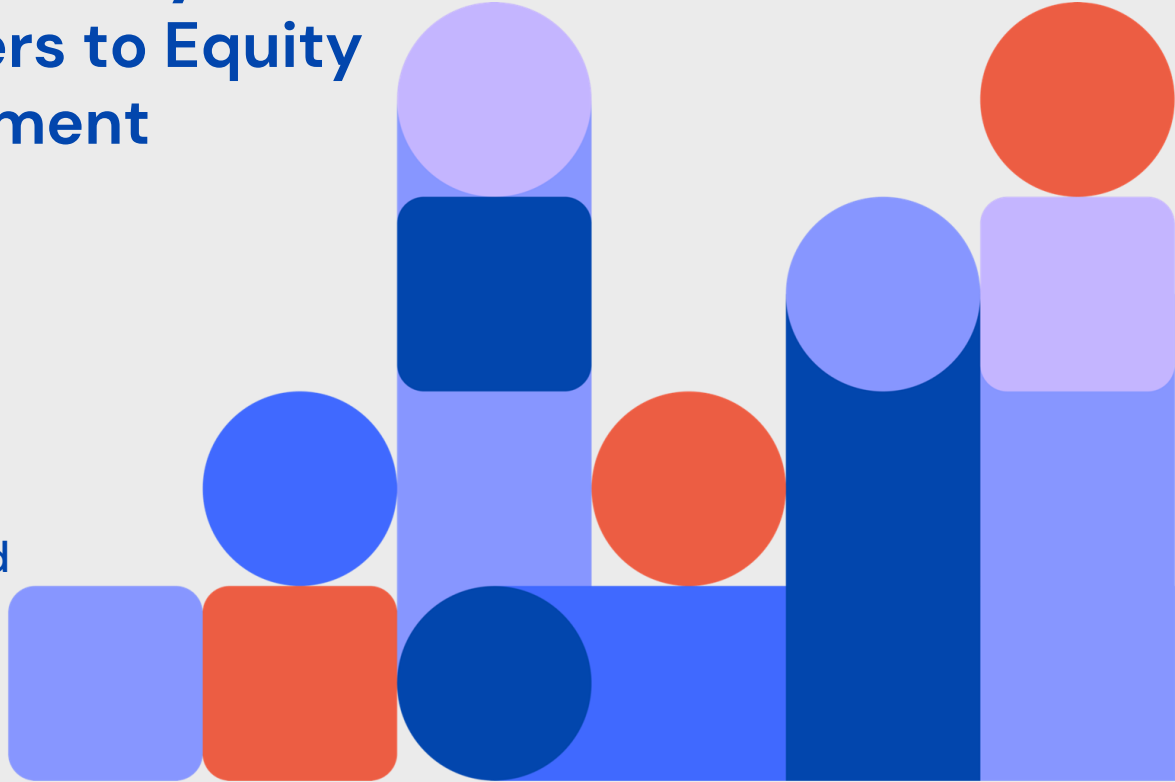


Texas Rio Grande Valley Broadband Coalition: Addressing the Barriers to Equity In Broadband Deployment

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August 27, 2024



Rio Grande Valley Broadband Coalition



What is a Colonia?



In Spanish, the term "colonia" means a **community** or **neighborhood**.

A colonia is a high poverty residential area along the Texas-Mexico border that lacks necessities such as potable water, sewer systems, paved roads, broadband, and safe housing.

Addressing the Root Cause: The Waiver Request



RICHARD F. CORTEZ
County Judge

OFFICE OF THE COUNTY JUDGE
County of Hidalgo



August 20, 2024

The Honorable Glenn Hegar
Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts
P.O. Box 13628, Capital Station
Austin, TX 78711-3628

Re: Request for Waiver of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Map to Determine Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Eligibility

Dear Comptroller Hegar:

I write to request that the Texas Broadband Development Office (BDO) and the Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), waive reliance on the FCC Federal Broadband Map (hereafter "the map") to determine eligibility and funding for broadband projects in persistent poverty counties along the Texas border, including the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) region of Texas (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy Counties). There is conclusive evidence that the map is not reflective of on-the-ground reality, and if used to determine eligibility will prevent the NTIA and Texas BDO from meeting the statutory requirements of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.¹

In the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), under section 60101, Congress made several policy findings that acknowledge the essential nature of broadband infrastructure to all citizens of the United States. Congress recognized that reliable, high-speed broadband is essential to full participation in modern life and that the digital divide is a barrier to the economic competitiveness of the United States and equitable distribution of essential public services, including health care and education. Significantly, as it relates to communities along the Texas border, Congress found that the digital divide disproportionately affects communities of color, lower-income areas, and rural areas and that it is critically important that reliable, high-speed broadband service be affordable to individuals, families, and communities.

For these reasons, Congress directed the NTIA to target persistent poverty regions of the country for investment under the IIJA BEAD program. Additionally, Congress required certain covered populations specifically targeted for IIJA funding, including low-income, racial, and ethnic minorities, rural, limited English proficiency, veterans, and older

¹ See attached, Memo to LRGVDC, "Strategy for Equity in the Awarding of Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act Broadband Grants for the Lower Rio Grande Valley" by Jazdana Barton-Garcia, Rio Grande Valley Broadband Coalition, Connect Humanity. Any modifications to the Federal Broadband Map resulting from any "challenge" have not changed the broad conclusions that the region is 100 percent covered. For this reason, the conclusions in the attached memo still apply.

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Americans. The Texas border region, including the four RGV counties referenced above, is one of four persistent poverty regions in the country, meaning that for at least three consecutive decades 20% or more of the population has been below the poverty line. See the latest persistent poverty map in the attached memo to the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council (LRGVDC).

Below are the statistics for some of the key RGV-covered populations under the IIJA:

Table 1. Rio Grande Valley Select Covered Populations

Select Covered Populations	Cameron (Rural/Urban Mix)	Hidalgo (Rural/Urban Mix)	Starr (Rural)	Willacy (Rural)	Texas
Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group	91.0%	93.9%	99.3%	88.8%	58.0%
Racial/Ethnic Minority: Percent Hispanic or Latino	90.0%	92.6%	96.3%	88.1%	39.8%

The (Hypothetical) Federal Broadband Map

- ISP Self Reported
- Neighborhoods an ISP says it can serve in 10 days
- “Access” means a neighborhood is “Passed”
- Passed (i.e., “Served”) can mean there is a wire that infrastructure can be placed on
- Don’t have to prove they have already installed the splitting equipment to serve a neighborhood
- Passed with any infrastructure
- Advertised speeds rather than actual speeds
- No accounting for cost of service or if customer must pay for a line extension to get service.
- ISPs not required to report actual active customers

City of Pharr Customer Map (Not Hypothetical)

April 2023-July 2024



▶ South Pharr - Lowest income area of the city/formerly the colonia Las Milpas

- ▶ 7,292 Homes Passed
- ▶ 3,039 Installed Customers
- ▶ 42% take rate overall

▶ City Overall

- ▶ 24,610 Homes Passed
- ▶ 8,022 Customers
- ▶ 33% take rate city wide



ARISE-IDRA RGV Digital Ambassadors



South Texas colonia students step up as tech connectors

A showcase of the Rio Grande Valley Digital Ambassadors Program

A Demonstration Project in Partnership
with ISPs to Take to Scale with IIJA
Funding

<https://connecthumanity.fund/story/south-texas-colonia-students-step-up-as-tech-connectors/>

