# Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant Program FAQs
## Updated 10/27/2023

### General Program Information

**Q: Is the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant connected to the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds?**

A: Yes, the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant is connected to ARPA funds, specifically the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds portion.

**Q: Will grant funds be split evenly between workforce development and digital skills?**

A: No. There is not an even split between workforce development and digital skills training. However, $5 million of the $17 million available will be allocated to adult educational entities regardless of the program type.

**Q: Can we apply for the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant more than once as it runs until 2026?**

A: There is currently only one round of funding, and it will cover the expenses for programming set to occur between June 30, 2024, at the latest, and December 31, 2026, at the latest. You are expected to estimate all expenses during this timeframe at once.

You may submit as many applications as you prefer, but only 2 at most will be granted if awarded. Each application can reflect only 1 project. For this round of funding, please submit your application(s) by Wednesday, December 6, 2023.

**Q: Is this entirely a reimbursement grant? Can a small percentage of the grant award be given up front to cover initial expenses?**

A: Yes, this is solely a reimbursement grant opportunity. There is no opportunity to provide any funding "up front." Expenses may be reimbursed throughout the project after invoices are submitted to TNECD.

### Eligibility Requirements

**Q: Who is eligible to apply for the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant?**

A: The following entities may apply for this grant:

- A local educational agency (e.g., community college, vocational school)
- A community-based organization or faith-based organization
- A volunteer literacy organization
- An institution of higher education

- A public or private nonprofit agency
- A library
- A public housing authority
- A nonprofit institution (that does not fit the above)
- A small business (1-10 employees)
- A consortium or coalition of the agencies, organizations, institutions, libraries, or entities described above
- A partnership between an employer and an entity above

Please note that the following entities are NOT eligible to apply for the grant: internet service providers; government entities (e.g., local government, corrections departments, commissions); and "pass-through" entities, or entities seeking to receive TNECD grant funding to distribute to other organizations through their own grant programs.

**Q: Under this grant, are communities defined by as counties or zip codes under the income requirement?**

A: Communities are defined by the county under this grant. Applicants proposing projects primarily in a county with an AMI below $65,880 are automatically eligible, while applicants proposing projects in counties with an AMI above $65,880 are required to additionally specify which "target population" they intend to serve (explained next).

**Automatically Eligible TN Counties.**
**(AMIs at or below $65,880)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Anderson, $53,801 | Dickson, $60,090 | Houston, $49,761 |
| Bedford, $57,149 | Dyer, $53,619 | Humphreys, $51,513 |
| Benton, $43,803 | Fentress, $41,056 | Jackson, $38,863 |
| Bledsoe, $52,876 | Franklin, $59,316 | Jefferson, $55,369 |
| Blount, $65,007 | Gibson, $49,691 | Johnson, $41,709 |
| Bradley, $57,804 | Giles, $56,200 | Lake, $45,236 |
| Campbell, $45,339 | Grainger, $49,953 | Lauderdale, $46,945 |
| Cannon, $61,229 | Greene, $50,427 | Lawrence, $51,475 |
| Carroll, $50,397 | Grundy, $46,206 | Lewis, $43,831 |
| Carter, $43,150 | Hamblen, $49,915 | Lincoln, $57,843 |
| Chester, $55,727 | Hamilton, $63,921 | Macon, $46,912 |
| Claiborne, $43,602 | Hancock, $34,308 | Madison, $53,408 |
| Clay, $40,165 | Hardeman, $45,257 | Marion, $54,613 |
| Cocke, $44,218 | Hardin, $50,011 | Marshall, $58,984 |
| Coffee, $58,226 | Hawkins, $47,543 | McMinn, $52,397 |
| Crockett, $52,319 | Haywood, $47,271 | McNairy, $46,340 |
| Cumberland, $52,859 | Henderson, $52,656 | Meigs, $55,670, |
| Decatur, $48,669 | Henry, $49,627 | Monroe, $50,955 |
| DeKalb, $53,624 | Hickman, $50,411 | Montgomery, $60,380 |

| Moore, $65,200 | Roane, $61,116 | Unicoi, $45,793 |
| Morgan, $47,829 | Scott, $40,709 | Union, $50,701 |
| Obion, $47,491 | Sequatchie, $55,151 | Van Buren, $51,645 |
| Overton, $48,906 | Sevier, $60,153 | Warren, $49,259 |
| Perry, $48,526 | Shelby, $58,770 | Washington, $56,325 |
| Pickett, $43,731 | Smith, $50,546 | Wayne, $48,720 |
| Polk, $49,638 | Stewart, $51,035 | Weakley, $48,405 |
| Putnam, $52,840 | Sullivan, $55,638 | White, $48,064 |
| Rhea, $52,194 | Trousdale, $60,577 | |

**TN Counties in Which Applicant Needs to Identify and Serve an Eligible Target Population (AMIs above $65,880)**

| Cheatham, $69,873 | Loudon, $66,000 | Sumner, $75,648 |
| Davidson, $71,223 | Maury, $71,932 | Tipton, $69,548 |
| Fayette, $71,734 | Robertson, $70,481 | Williamson, $124,055 |
| Knox, $66,183 | Rutherford, $74,070 | Wilson, $88,695 |

**Q: What is a "target population", and where does this matter?**

A "target population" is the population that the applicant will directly serve if they are awarded a grant. Applicants with projects proposed in counties with an AMI above $65,880 will have to indicate in their applications that they are serving at least one of the following 5 "target populations":

- Providing services in a Qualified Census Tracts: Census Tracts, blocks, or zip codes that meet the designation of "impacted"/"disproportionately impacted" designation or are considered Qualified Census Tracts. Qualified Census Tracts (2022) can be found at: https://www.huduser.gov/portal/qct/1statetable.html?statefp=47.0&DDAYEAR=2022

- Households at or below 300% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines for a default household size of 3 ($65,880)
- Households that experienced unemployment or increased food or housing insecurity
- Households that qualify for the Children's Health Insurance Program, Childcare Subsidies through the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) Program, or Medicaid
- Title 1 Schools

If none of these categories apply, the applicant must define an "Other" target population and specify in their application how the population was "impacted" or "disproportionately impacted" by the COVID-19 pandemic. Per SLFRF guidelines, "impacted" means that the population experienced general, broad-based impacts of the pandemic, while "disproportionately impacted" means that the population experienced meaningfully more severe impacts, often due to pre-existing disparities. Please note that the proposed project must be designed to respond to the COVID-19 impact you specify.

For more information, please reference the **ARPA SLFRF Final Rule** (pages 12, 17 to 20, 32 to 34) or the **2023 Interim Final Rule** (pages 42 to 43).

You may also verify with TNECD whether your proposed "Other" target population meets state and federal guidelines prior to completing the application by emailing ECD.Broadband@TN.gov or one of the points of contact listed at the end of this document.

**Q: Is my organization still eligible to apply if our target population does not fall into one of the 5 pre-defined target populations?**

Possibly. If you propose a project in a county with an AMI above $65,880 and your intended target population does not fall into one of the 5 pre-defined target populations, then you must define an "Other" target population and specify in your application how the population was "impacted" or "disproportionately impacted" by the COVID-19 pandemic. Per SLFRF guidelines, "impacted" means that the population experienced general, broad-based impacts of the pandemic, while "disproportionately impacted" means that the population experienced meaningfully more severe impacts, often due to pre-existing disparities.

For more information, please reference the **ARPA SLFRF Final Rule** (pages 12, 17 to 20, 32 to 34) or the **2023 Interim Final Rule** (pages 42 to 43).

You may also verify with TNECD whether your proposed target population meets state and federal guidelines prior to completing the application by emailing ECD.Broadband@TN.gov or one of the points of contact listed at the end of this document.

**Q: How does TNECD expect applicants to track eligibility verification?**

Applicants will have to track eligibility verification only if they are awarded a grant (not during the application phase) and depending on whether they are proposing a project in an eligible county or Qualified Census Tract.

If the project is in a Qualified Census Tract or an eligible county (county AMI is below $65,880), verifying that the end user is eligible is not required.

If the applicant is not providing services in a Qualified Census Tract or an automatically eligible county (county AMI is below $65,880), they will have to state in their application how they plan to verify that projects will serve eligible individuals or households *if/when awarded the grant.*

This verification responsibility will be outlined in the subrecipient agreement, and TNECD will monitor this verification process through the period of performance. TNECD will confirm that funds are being deployed for eligible uses on an ongoing basis during quarterly reporting and a mid-point monitoring site visit or phone call.

Qualified Census Tracts (2022) can be found at:
https://www.huduser.gov/portal/qct/1statetable.html?statefp=47.0&DDAYEAR=2022

**Q: If a school applies for funding, do they have to show justification that most/all students fall under the AMI thresholds?**

A: For educational services and other efforts to address educational disparities, Treasury will recognize Title I eligible schools as disproportionately impacted and responsive services that support the school generally or support the whole school service as eligible. "Title I eligible schools" means schools eligible to receive services under section 1113 of Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended (20 U.S.C. 6313), including schools served under section 1113(b)(1)(C) of that Act. (SLFRF Compliance Guide, page 23)

**Q: Do all beneficiaries have to have their eligibility tracked individually?**

A: If the project is not providing services in a Qualified Census Tract or an eligible county (county with AMI below $65,880), the grantee will be responsible for verifying that the individual end-users of the proposed project satisfy the state and federal guidance. This can be done through the grantee receipt of state or federal information or documentation that verifies eligibility, including but not limited to, any qualifying benefits program, such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, income eligibility, or proof of residency that the direct beneficiary lives in a Qualified Census Tract or Zip Code.

**Q: Can organizations with workforce programs apply for the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant?**

A: Yes, organizations with workforce programs may apply for this grant; however, please check that your organization is eligible to apply based on the list of eligible entities (listed above).

**Q: Can the Tennessee Board of Regents apply on behalf of colleges in eligible communities and populations?**

A: Yes, because they are a local educational agency, the Tennessee Board of Regents may apply on behalf of colleges in eligible communities and populations but must specify those campuses. Please note that the same guidelines about eligible counties and target populations (if applicable) would still apply.

**Q: Is serving immigrant populations with undefined legal status primarily a barrier to receiving grant funding?**

A: If the applicant is not offering services in a county with an AMI below $65,880 or a Qualified Census Tract, documentation will be needed to verify the eligibility of the end user such as proof the household income is below 300% of Federal Poverty Guidelines, households face food insecurity, or households receive federal benefits. ECD will ask for the documentation validating the end users by sampling documentation during a mid-point monitoring visit. ECD will not ask for personally identifiable information.

**Q: What type of demographic information will be asked of the end user during quarterly reporting?**

Those awarded will have to submit quarterly reports that will include the total number of applicants served and aggregate demographic data of those served as well as long-term outcomes of those served and required expenditure data. ECD will not ask for personally identifiable information on those served during reporting or the mid-point monitoring/ site visit.

## Project Information

**Q: Do the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce trainings need to be in-person?**

A: Trainings are strongly preferred to be community-based, in-person trainings.

**Q: Why are outreach programs promoting ACP not allowable by themselves?**

A: Per SLFRF guidelines, the State of Tennessee is afforded the permission to tailor federal requirements on the disbursement of SLFRF funds to state priorities. Accordingly, the primary focus of the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant is to support digital skills training and workforce development programming. Outreach promoting ACP can be a component of the proposed project, but it cannot be the only focus; to be allowed, it MUST be paired with digital skills training or workforce development programming.

**Q: Could TNECD share examples of strong project proposals for these funds?**

A: A robust DSEW program is essential to developing market-relevant competencies, promoting professional growth, and enhancing learner agency. Training under this program will provide a quality education that focuses on improving measurable outcomes for individuals. DSEW's primary objective in providing grants to participants is to enable Tennessee citizens to acquire digital skills, experience, abilities, and qualifications essential for their personal and professional growth in the digital environment. We are committed to empowering our citizens with the skills they need to succeed in today's job market across possible categories listed below.

- o Adult education
- o Intermediate and/or specialized digital skills training in K-12 schools
- o Workplace education
- o Micro-learning
- o Apprenticeship program
- o Industry-relevant credentialing programs
- o Digital navigators
- o Providing training to trainers/educators on eligible activities
- o Other educational activities

## Application Information

**Q: Can only one individual from an organization have a SmartSimple log-in?**

A: Multiple individuals within an organization may have a SmartSimple log-in. However, only one individual may edit the application at a time.

**Q: If our organization does not have its own procurement policy, what should we upload for this required attachment?**

A: If your organization does not have its own procurement policy, you will be required to adopt the State of Tennessee's procurement policy for this grant, which will be distributed upon award (if awarded). For the required attachment in SmartSimple, you may upload a document simply stating that your organization does not have a procurement policy and plans to adopt the State of Tennessee's procurement policy.

**Q: How do we sufficiently answer how our proposed project incorporates evidenced-based methodologies?**

A: The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) places a heavy emphasis on investing in evidence-based interventions. In your response, please cite at least one experimental study (randomized control trial) or two non-experimental studies (qualitative studies) that inform the design of your program. If no evidence exists, please outline how your program will conduct program evaluation to generate additional evidence for the field of digital opportunity.  For more information, please consult the resources provided by the US Treasury here: https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/SLFRF-Evidence-Webinar.pdf

### Budget

**Q: Can grant funds cover wages that are distributed to a contractor?**

A: Yes, grant funds that are distributed to a contractor can be listed as a line item under the "Professional Fees" budget category.

**Q: For the Administrative Expenses budget category, can a Development District assist with administrative and grant assistance with fees? Are administrative costs included?**

A: Development Districts support may be considered as an administrative cost. If the applicant does not have an indirect cost rate, up to 6% is allowed to be allocated to the administrative cost in the budget request.

**Q: Do we have to estimate Project Contingency in our budget?**

A: No, you do not have to reflect contingency costs in your budget for the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant.

**Q: For the budget document, can spending extend beyond 2026?**

A: No, funds must be expended by December 31, 2026. The budget narrative can include this information to provide project context, but funding is limited to the contract lifespan.


**Q: Will funding be paid out at the end or during the grant project?**

A: Funding will be paid throughout the project. The entity will submit invoices to TNECD and eligible expenses will be reimbursed at the match rate.


**Q: What is the turnaround time for reimbursements once expenses are submitted?**

A: The reimbursement turnaround time is approximately 3 weeks from submitting a correct invoice to payment processed.


**Q: How often can grantees submit expense reports?**

A: ECD prefers that grantees submit their expense reports no more than once a month.


**Q: Please elaborate on what can be counted towards the 10% match.**

A: The required 10% match is a cash match. In-kind contributions (e.g., services provided by partnering community anchor institutions, donated office or meeting space, labor) will not be considered.

Since the grant is reimbursement-based, TNECD will reimburse grantees for 90% of each invoice of those eligible costs incurred. For example, if $100 in eligible expenses is submitted, the grantee will be paid $90.


**Key Dates**

**Q: When will the determinations be made for the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant?**

A: Determinations will be made for the grant by March 2024.

**Q: What is the duration of the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant?**

A: All Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant contracts end by December 31, 2026.

**Q: Is there a period in which grant applicants will be notified if they did not submit something correctly and can make updates?**

A: There is a completeness review period to ensure all materials were submitted correctly. TNECD may take up to 7 to 10 business days (December 7–20, 2023) to review the application for completeness. If TNECD determines that an application is incomplete, TNECD will allow the applicant 5 business days to make the necessary adjustments.

**Additional Information**

**Q: What is TNECD Broadband's website?**

A: For more information regarding the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant, please visit: https://www.tn.gov/ecd/rural-development/broadband-office/grants.html

**Q: Will additional information, such as the webinar slides, webinar recording, and FAQs, be posted on TNECD's website?**

A: Yes, to view the presentation from and watch the recording of the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant webinar, please visit: https://www.tn.gov/ecd/rural-development/broadband-office/grants.html, and click on the "Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development" tab.

**Q: Who can I contact directly for more information about the grant eligibility requirements?**

A: For more questions regarding the Digital Skills, Education, and Workforce Development Grant, please contact one of the following individuals:
- Codi Drake | Broadband Grants Coordinator – Digital Opportunity Coordinator
  codi.drake@tn.gov
- Leah Mims | Broadband Grants Coordinator
  leah.mims@tn.gov
- Taylre M. Beaty | State Broadband Director
  taylre.beaty@tn.gov

**Q: Who can I contact directly for questions about SmartSimple?**

A: For more questions regarding SmartSimple, please contact one of the following individuals:
- K.Taylor Collins| Grant Project Administrator
  k.taylor.collins@tn.gov
- Emily Hale | Broadband Grants and Program Manager
  emily.hale@tn.gov