

## 1.0 Message from Acting Director, OBAE

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Dear fellow New Mexicans,

My name is Drew Lovelace, and I serve as the Acting Director of the Office of Broadband Access and Expansion (OBAE). Our agency was created three years ago to lead the statewide mission of fostering universal broadband availability and digital inclusion for ALL New Mexicans—residents, businesses, and community institutions. This mission required a comprehensive, detailed, and action-oriented plan. Exactly two years ago, OBAE published its first-ever strategic plan, called the “Three Year Broadband Plan.” This Plan not only fulfilled a legislative requirement but, more importantly, informed the public about OBAE’s goals, strategic priorities, key initiatives, and action items to bridge the digital divide through expanding broadband deployment and adoption.



This document represents the third and final iteration of that first series. Next year, we’ll develop our second series of a three-year plan, which may involve newer priorities and initiatives after considering the tremendous progress achieved and gaps remaining to achieve our mission.

I have used this opening letter to highlight key themes that define the “DNA” of OBAE. Last year, I wrote about the importance of multistakeholder collaboration. Specifically, private entities (service providers, vendors), the public sector (federal, state, local, tribal), non-profit organizations, and academia – by working together and applying their distinct resources and skills – can drive a myriad of synergies that serve the public interest. A notable example includes the formation of the Emergency Broadband Operations Team (EBOT) to expedite the restoration of communications services in the Ruidoso/Mescalero area during and after the devastating South Fork and Salt Fires this past June. Several ISPs, some of whom are competitors, banded resources and shared assets to accelerate this restoration. I especially recognize Godfrey Enjady, General Manager of Mescalero Apache Telecom, Inc. (MATI) and Chair of the Connect NM Tribal Working Group, for leading this effort.

### ***Significance of Evidence-Based Decision Making***

This year, I highlight an equally important theme that runs through all facets of OBAE’s daily work, which is the practice of “evidence-based decision-making.” This theme applies to all facets of our multifaceted role – e.g., designing and implementing grant funding programs; monitoring and validating programmatic compliance of our awardees; expanding the scope and capabilities of the Statewide Education Network; providing technical assistance across the New Mexican broadband ecosystem; engaging in stakeholder outreach to solicit feedback on key bottlenecks and solutions; launching workforce development programs; supporting capacity building initiatives to foster meaningful broadband adoption; etc.

### ***Reflection of OBAE’s Values***

This theme of “evidence-based decision-making” reflects one of the seven values that our team defines as values to live by daily, which is being “Analytically Rigorous”. It also complements our six other values

(Honest, Courageous, Curious, Innovative, Respectful, and Collaborative.) These other values become more engrained into our identity when discussions, deliberations and, ultimately, decisions are grounded in facts, reasonable assumptions, and rigorous analysis.

### ***Critical to the Planning and Award Determinations for the Historic BEAD Grant Program***

Evidence-based decision-making is critical to the success of the Broadband, Equity, and Access Development (BEAD) grant program, which is the largest public investment program (ever) to expand broadband infrastructure to unserved and underserved locations. Specifically, OBAE will allocate \$675.4 million in grant awards, which require a 25% matching contribution, thus potentially driving \$900 million in infrastructure funding.

Over the past year in 2024, our team relied on a data-driven record to ensure optimal decisions are made in 2025. For example, the BEAD Challenge Process provided a structured process for stakeholders to contest broadband service classifications over a 14-week period. Thus, a location incorrectly labeled as “served” could still be eligible for BEAD funding, and those mistakenly labeled as “unserved” or “underserved” would be removed to avoid “overbuild.” The process allowed OBAE to develop a more accurate view of broadband availability across the state and to determine which locations will be eligible for BEAD funding.

In addition, OBAE issued a “Request for Information” (RFI) to obtain input on our determination of Project Area Units (PAUs), or defined boundaries for where bids can be placed. The final version of the PAUs reflects extensive changes following public comments and feedback. These changes resulted in more PAUs that better reflect existing network infrastructure, helping applicants to design successful BEAD projects. OBAE proudly admits that the best “evidence” often comes from our communities and local stakeholders. Our role is to be the neutral arbiter that leverages that input and relevant analysis to make decisions that best serve the public interest. New Mexico stands as the fifth-largest state in terms of size. Thus, it’s critically important that we rely on local input gained through processes like the RFI, which has been instrumental to many proceedings in building a record of valuable feedback and will continue to be.

### ***Integral to Project Evaluation Framework for Connect New Mexico Fund***

Another example of evidence-based decision-making involves our application review process for the Connect New Mexico Fund last year and the prior year’s Connect New Mexico Pilot Program. The scoring framework involved eight major categories and some 25 sub-categories. The curing process, which may require one to two months, allows our team to clarify data, gather missing information, and address concerns. After curing, OBAE may negotiate with the applicant to invest a higher matching contribution after consideration of the business case (e.g., revenues, operating expenses, capital investment) and the rate of return. We may also negotiate for a lower set of prices after comparing them to urban rates across the country. Such negotiations again are influenced by OBAE’s assessment of the facts.

Those programs encompass a Mapping Review processes to ensure funds were allocated to unserved and underserved locations. Thus, award notifications sometimes take up to eight months, if not longer, from the time of program launch. I certainly understand when applicants and communities seek a faster response. I also remind my team that we cannot afford to let “perfect be the enemy of the good,” as the delay in getting broadband has negative socioeconomic consequences. We’ll continue improving our

processes, procedures, and protocols to become more efficient while making optimal decisions based on a thorough review of the facts.

### ***Digital Equity Grant Program***

OBAE will soon launch the state's digital equity capacity grant program, called PINON, which stands for Promoting Internet Needs of New Mexicans Grant (PINON). The \$8.67 million fund can be used to support digital skills activities, digital navigator activities, device distribution activities, technical support, and capacity-building. In addition, they must foster broadband adoption to eight covered populations – including low-income households, aging populations, incarcerated individuals, veterans, people with disabilities, people with language barriers, racial and ethnic minorities, and rural-based residents. NTIA further requires the project to advance economic and workforce development, education, healthcare, civic/social engagement, and delivery of essential services. Our review team will consider the application data to ensure our awards collectively meet these federal mandates and can be most effectively and efficiently implemented.

### ***Empowering Applicants to Prepare Quality Applications Through GWEP***

Our office made several awards for the GWEP (Grant Writing, Engineering, and Planning) grant program, which involves a \$5 million fund to assist electric and telephone co-ops, local governments, and tribes with preparing technical and financial plans and grant applications for projects to connect the unserved. GWEP empowers applicants to prepare detailed, comprehensive, fact- and analysis-driven responses. Organizations that lack internal resources for such planning should not have to stand behind others when grants are essential to their socioeconomic advancement.

### ***Closing Remarks***

In closing, I am honored to have led this organization over the last 15 months. Our team is grateful for the resounding support of Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham. The Governor's directive to OBAE is clear: connect all New Mexican residents and entities with affordable, reliable, high-speed Internet and remove every barrier limiting them from taking advantage of the rich resources online. Second, we are grateful to the Legislature, who, working with the Governor, have given us resources to build our team and provide grant funds necessary to bridge the digital divide. Finally, collaborative stakeholder engagement, coupled with evidence-based decision-making, have been instrumental to the progress made in achieving the Governor's vision.

You may have heard me say that OBAE may be at the "tip of the spear," but it's the vast set of New Mexican broadband stakeholders that provide the thrust. I continue to welcome that model. Please never hesitate to contact me or my team with your ideas and suggestions. Our mission depends upon it.

Sincerely,

Drew Lovelace  
Acting Director, Office of Broadband Access and Expansion (OBAE)