



**MAINE  
CONNECTIVITY  
AUTHORITY**

## **REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL**

The Maine Connectivity Authority is requesting proposals for a:

### **Digital Equity Research Partner**

<b>RFP Issued:</b>	November 4, 2022
<b>Due Date for Questions:</b>	November 23, 2022
<b>Proposals Due:</b>	<b>December 16 , 2022, by 11:59 PM</b>
<b>Proposal Evaluations:</b>	December 16 - 18, 2022
<b>Notice of Award:</b>	December 20, 2022
<b>Expected Start Date:</b>	<i>TBD with chosen contractor: goal for initial kick-off meeting December if possible, Anticipated Project Start Jan 3, 2023</i>

#### **Submit Proposals and any questions via e-mail to:**

Maggie Drummond-Bahl  
Maine Connectivity Authority  
mbahl@maineconnectivity.org

#### **Please email an electronic copy of your final submission to the specified e-mail address.**

Proposals must be received prior to the time and date for which they are due. Any proposal, portion of a proposal, or unrequested proposal revision received by the Maine Connectivity Authority after the time and date specified above **will not** be accepted.

All requests for clarification and/or requests for additional information regarding the RFP must be **submitted in writing via email and directed to the Staff contact listed above**. Such correspondence must reference the RFP and project name in the subject line.

**The Maine Connectivity Authority reserves the right to answer or not to answer any question received.**

**THIS REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL IS 10 PAGES (including the title page).**

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## **PART I. General Information**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The Maine Connectivity Authority (“**MCA**”) is seeking proposals from qualified, independent researchers, consultants, research or consulting groups, institutions, or firms (“**Respondents**”) that **can assist the MCA to conduct baseline research evaluating barriers to broadband access and adoption, and testing and evaluating the impact of proposed solutions and programs to expand universal access.**

The specific services that the MCA is requesting assistance with are listed below. Through this RFP, the MCA anticipates executing a contract with one or more successful Applicants to perform a combination of these services.

### **1.2 Project Background**

The MCA was established in 2021 as a quasi-governmental agency charged with achieving the universal access of affordable high-speed internet service in Maine.

In particular, the MCA is working to achieve three goals:

- 1) Ensure that effective, accessible connectivity is universally available in the state;
- 2) Ensure that there is secure, affordable, reliable, competitive, sustainable, and forward-looking infrastructure that can meet future needs; and
- 3) Ensure that all residents, businesses, and institutions in Maine are able to take full advantage of the economic, health, educational, and other opportunities available through connectivity services.

The MCA is advancing digital equity for all Mainers by focusing on projects, places, and people. MCA’s full strategic summary can be found [here](#).

The MCA has applied for planning funds through both the Digital Equity Act (DEA) and the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) program under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). The result of the combined planning process will be a 5-Year Broadband Action Plan which contains a state Digital Equity Plan. With the completion of the planning phases in the summer and fall of 2023, the MCA will apply for significant implementation funding to support the projects and strategies identified in the Plan.

**Starting in December 2022 the MCA intends to work with partners and stakeholders to conduct baseline research which, combined with the development of the broadband service maps identifying served/unserved/underserved areas of Maine, will generate data and analysis to inform the plan development, guide investment of resources, and serve as a baseline for tracking the impact of broadband and digital equity investment over time.**

## PART II. Scope of Work

### 2.1 Project Scope of Work (“Services”)

The MCA is seeking assistance in designing and implementing a research process and product as a key part of the planning process and plan development as well as ongoing evaluation of MCA’s investments in broadband and digital equity.

We are seeking a research partner (or partners if necessary) to oversee and execute the delivery of the services listed below. Recognizing that a single partner might not be able to deliver all services listed, we expect that the primary partner will subcontract with others when appropriate. MCA will also accept RFP responses for single elements of the scope outlined below. Timeframes noted are projected service start dates. Work in each area is expected to continue beyond the dates listed.

#### Develop Digital Equity Analysis (Start December 2022)

MCA will utilize the definition of digital equity from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance: *Digital equity is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.*

**MCA expects to utilize this analysis to 1) identify priority areas for investment within our funding programs, and 2) set a baseline and measure progress over time in achieving digital equity in Maine.**

Deliverables for a research partner include:

- Develop a research approach to analyze levels of digital equity in Maine, utilizing census data and demographic analysis to augment data being developed in the Broadband Intelligence Platform (MCA’s mapping of broadband service availability [here](#) - scroll down on our homepage).
  - Data that might be part of this analysis include potential outcomes from achieving digital equity (educational attainment, employment and income levels, health indicators, remote work for example) as well as more direct measurements such as internet service at home, devices in the home, [enrollment in the affordable connectivity program](#), cost of available monthly internet service plans, telehealth utilization, availability and utilization of digital services by state or local governments or agencies, etc.
  - Some examples of digital equity analysis employed by others include Purdue University [Digital Divide Index and Analysis](#) and this [analysis](#) by a collection of tech researchers and commentators. **What you can see from these examples is that measuring and tracking digital equity is an emerging body of work, and MCA seeks an approach that works for Maine and a research partner who can help us find it.**
- Work with MCA’s Geospatial Data Analyst to examine data geographically as well as within specific populations starting with “covered populations” identified in the Digital Equity Act including low-income households, older adults, incarcerated individuals, veterans, individuals with disabilities, individuals with a language barrier, racial and ethnic minorities and people living in rural areas.

- NTIA has developed a [digital equity population viewer](#) that shows each state's percentage of the population that is considered one of the "covered populations" listed above as well as levels of internet and device access and use.
- Support the geographic or spatial visualization of the Digital Equity Analysis in conjunction with the Broadband Intelligence Platform working with MCA staff and consultants.
- Design the analysis so that survey and focus group results for particular areas and populations can be utilized in the analysis, as well as the Digital Equity Asset Inventory currently under development by the University of Maine Center on Aging. The Asset Inventory (complete in December) will catalog a variety of digital inclusion plans developed by communities, regions, or agencies as well as programs that support affordable access to the internet, internet-enabled devices, technical support, and digital skill building.
- Develop dashboards to help communicate and translate the analysis and progress for MCA staff, board, partners and stakeholders, as well as the public.

### **Research Connectivity of Affordable Housing Units & Residents (December 2022- March 2023)**

MCA has a specific interest in better understanding the connectivity of residents of affordable housing because many of these residents include the "covered populations" identified in the Digital Equity Act and because there are specific funding opportunities within the [Broadband Equity Access and Deployment \(BEAD\) program](#) to address broadband access and adoption in affordable housing.

The research partner will assist MCA to:

- Analyze the connectivity status of affordable housing communities and units in Maine, including whether individual units have access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet service and/or the availability, speed, and reliability of public access wifi across units or within buildings.
- Survey residents to understand broadband access, uses, needs, and affordability, including: whether they have monthly internet service, the speed and cost of that service, whether they're utilizing the Affordable Connectivity Program benefit, whether they have devices including what types of devices and how they use them, what they use the internet to do, perceptions of the value of connectivity, whether they have access to or would be interested in access to education, workforce, and telehealth services, etc.
- *Please note: this work will be supported by MCA's partnership with Education Superhighway, which will provide data for the location and characteristics of affordable housing units in Maine, to include subsidized housing as well as locations where vouchers are being utilized. This data will include housing that meets eligibility criteria for our funding sources and may also include some additional demographic data about residents, particularly the covered populations in the Digital Equity Act - examples might include affordable housing for older adults or affordable housing for people in recovery or people with disabilities.*

### **Design and Conduct Surveys & Focus Groups for Digital Equity Planning Process (December 2022-March 2023)**

As part of the development of a Digital Equity Plan for Maine (draft due for public comment by June 1, 2022), MCA seeks to gather data directly from Maine residents broadly and within the covered populations within the Digital Equity Act to better understand the areas our plan should address and explore strategies to address them.

- Design survey instruments and conduct surveys examining barriers to connectivity and testing solutions within the Digital Equity planning process
- Design and work with partner organizations to conduct focus groups examining barriers to connectivity and testing solutions within the Digital Equity planning process
- Surveys and focus groups will target Maine people broadly and within geographic regions as well as specific covered populations named in the Digital Equity Act including low-income households, older adults, incarcerated individuals, veterans, individuals with disabilities, individuals with a language barrier, racial and ethnic minorities and rural inhabitants.
- Present and analyze survey and focus group data both geographically and by population
- Support the visualization of the data in conjunction with the Broadband Intelligence Platform working with MCA staff and consultants
- Advise on the timing of conducting additional digital equity analysis and survey and focus group cycles to analyze the impact of MCA investment over time.

## **2.2 Deliverables**

The selected Respondent will complete each of the below activities related to the research deliverables identified above.

1. Hold a kick-off team meeting with the MCA team where roles, responsibilities, schedules, goals, and project communication strategies will be agreed upon, and arrange regular meetings as needed.
2. Hold regular check-in meetings and conduct other activities to track and communicate progress in each research area.
3. Develop action plans and timelines for the implementation of the services listed above.
4. Introduce the MCA team and coordinate meetings with any subconsultants contracted to provide the services listed.
5. Develop and share all research products with MCA having the full rights to use them in any format. At a minimum products should include: a publishable report, a summary slide deck, editable data sets with specifications and standards agreed to by MCA staff, infographics, and other web site copy and content. Stand-alone website work products should be designed to nest and integrate with MCA's primary website.
6. Conduct presentations as needed and available with MCA staff, board, stakeholders and others.

The MCA will make available, to the best extent possible, introductions and other assets that may assist the selected consultant in the design and implementation of the research project and individual elements. Other assets that may assist the Research Partner include:

1. MCA's Broadband Intelligence Platform developed with MCA Consultants detailing broadband access across the state and identifying served, underserved, and unserved areas
2. MCA's Geospatial Data Analyst on staff, Meghan Grabill
3. The Maine Digital Equity Taskforce, made up of organizations which represent or serve the covered populations named in the Digital Equity Act, will be primary partners in the survey and focus group activities
4. Regional Broadband Partners: 12-15 partner organizations across the state to be identified in November 2022
5. The Broadband Workforce analysis that is currently being conducted by Camoin Associates, will be completed in December 2022

6. Digital Equity Asset Inventory currently being collected by the University of Maine Center on Aging, to be completed by December 2022
7. Affordable housing data detailing location, characteristics, and funding eligibility by Education Superhighway
8. Support from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance in survey tool development; templates are in development
9. Network of MCA partners and stakeholders, including the Maine Broadband Coalition, communities participating in MCA grant and technical support programs, state agencies, ISP industry partners, etc.

## **2.3 Timeline**

**Respondents who can mobilize quickly to meet MCA's required planning and funding deadlines will be prioritized. Respondents are encouraged to address timing and the ability to mobilize resources quickly in their proposals.**

MCA will develop a contract term and timeline in partnership with the chosen research partner or partners, with the option to renew on an annual basis, commencing upon full execution of the contract. The contract may be extended beyond the periods outlined within each research area above depending on progress on deliverables and both parties' consent.

The MCA reserves the right to modify the initial contract term at its sole discretion, as well as awarding additional phases of the project when it is in the best interest of the MCA.

## **PART III. Respondent Requirements**

### **3.1 Eligibility**

The MCA is seeking a consultant with at least ten (10) years of experience in (1) research, data collection and analysis and (2) working with state and/or local governments, community organizations, and other stakeholders.

The selected team will be expected to:

- a. Have or retain staff that can be easily available for both in-person and/or virtual consultations with appropriate notice,
- b. Communicate effectively with involved parties, such as stakeholders, state agencies, and community partners. Communications may be with or on behalf of the MCA, and
- c. Applicants must be able to confirm that they have no existing conflicts. Other projects or business dealings shall not interfere with the ability of the selected consultant to work with or provide this information.

The selected Respondent ideally will also:

- d. Have experience/familiarity with doing business in the State of Maine,
- e. Have interest and ability to enter into a long-term partnership with the MCA,
- f. Have familiarity with the existing digital equity and inclusion research and analysis,
- g. Have familiarity and experience with large-scale surveying and conducting focus groups with a broad array of partners.

### **3.2 Proposal**

- Please share the following information in your proposal to this RFP ("**Proposal**"):
  - a. Resumes of key personnel and experience with similar types of projects or projects in Maine or elsewhere in the past ten (10) years
  - b. The particular Services that can be provided and those that lay outside the expertise of the applicant
  - c. List of additional partners, if any, that are expected to be used to complete the Services
  - d. Project approach/strategy
  - e. Details of cost and timing to complete the Services, including a specific itemization of costs
  - f. Debarment certification (Section 4.8)
- All costs incurred in connection with responding to this RFP shall be borne by the Applicant.

### **3.3 Clarifications and Amendments**

- It will be the Respondent's responsibility to check the referenced website for any clarifications and/or any new amendments to the RFP (note, the Applicant must include reference to all amendments, to the extent they exist, in their response to the RFP).

## **PART IV. Proposal Evaluation**

### **4.1 Interview**

- The MCA reserves the right to interview none, one, or multiple Applicants for further clarification and evaluation of their proposals.

### **4.2 Award**

- The MCA reserves the right to reject any and all submissions without the right of recourse by any Respondent. The submission of a Proposal shall not in any manner obligate the MCA to enter into a contract or to be responsible for the costs incurred by the Respondent in responding to this request.
- The MCA will notify each Respondent in writing whether it has been selected or not.

### **4.3 Contract Term, Type, and Payment Method**

- The contract term will be decided upon in consultation with the chosen research partner(s) and could extend until December 31, 2023, commencing upon full execution of the contract.
- The MCA reserves the right to modify the initial contract term at its sole discretion, as well as awarding additional phases of the project when it is in the best interest of the MCA.
- The contract type and payment method utilized for this project shall be determined by the MCA following MCA's award of the contract.
- If the MCA cannot successfully conclude a contract with the first-ranked Respondent, the MCA reserves the right to award the contract to alternative Respondents.

#### 4.4 Non-Appropriations

The Respondent acknowledges that the MCA is a quasi-governmental agency dependent upon state and federal funding. Although the MCA intends to enter into the proposed contract relying upon certain federal and state funding, the MCA will not be able to proceed with the contract unless such anticipated funding is ultimately received.

Therefore, notwithstanding any other provision of this RFP and any contract resulting therefrom, if at any time the MCA receives insufficient funds to meet the obligations established pursuant to the contract or for any reason is denied legal authority by the Maine Legislature or the Court system to expend funds appropriated for such purposes, then the MCA may terminate any contractual relationship established as a result of this solicitation and shall not be penalized for doing so.

#### 4.5 Confidentiality of Information

Respondent acknowledges that it will be required by the contract to maintain the confidentiality of any confidential information provided by the MCA and to sign a non-disclosure agreement.

#### 4.6 Freedom of Information/Proposal Confidentiality

Interested parties are advised that under Maine's Freedom of Access Act, Title 1 M.R.S.A. Chapter 13 §402 (3), et seq., "Public Records" (as that term is defined in Title 1 M.R.S.A. Chapter 13 §402(3)) are available for public inspection and copying once an award notification has been made.

As a general matter, information submitted in response to this RFP will be considered to be "Public Records" available for public inspection and copying once an award notification has been made. If, however, a Respondent believes that parts of its Proposal fall within one or more of the exceptions to the definition of "Public Records" set forth in Title 1 M.R.S.A. Chapter 13 §402(3), that a Respondent may submit those parts of its Proposal, with each page marked "Confidential" in a separate file marked "Confidential". Included in the file must be a non-confidential statement of the basis for a Respondent's claim that those parts of its Proposal fall within one or more of the exceptions to the definition of "public records".

#### **Designating part of a Proposal "Confidential" does not by itself ensure that those parts of the Proposal will remain confidential.**

In the event that the MCA receives a request to inspect or copy those parts of the Respondent's Proposal marked confidential, the MCA will notify the Respondent that such a request has been received. Any Respondent claiming documents are confidential shall, within 14 days of receiving the MCA's notice, send the MCA a list identifying each document that it claims is confidential. If the MCA agrees that the documents so identified fall within one of the exceptions to the definition of "Public Records", the MCA will notify the party requesting disclosure that the documents will be withheld.

If the party seeking disclosure files a legal action to gain access to the confidential information, then the Respondent must retain counsel and file for a protective order. The Respondent's failure to join the action and secure a protective order shall constitute a waiver of its claim that the information is confidential. The MCA will comply with the order issued by the reviewing court.

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#### **4.7 Debarment Certification**

The applicant shall be required to submit the following certification as part of the contract:

By submitting to this RFP, I certify to the best of my knowledge and belief that the aforementioned organization, its principals, and any subcontractors named in this Proposal:

1. Are not presently debarred, suspended, proposed for debarment, and declared ineligible or voluntarily excluded from bidding or working on contracts issued by any governmental agency.
2. Have not within three (3) years of submitting the Proposal for this contract been convicted of or had a civil judgment rendered against them for:
  - i. fraud or a criminal offense in connection with obtaining, attempting to obtain, or performing a federal, state, or local government transaction or contract.
  - ii. violating Federal or State antitrust statutes or committing embezzlement, theft, forgery, bribery, falsification or destruction of records, making false statements, or receiving stolen property;
  - iii. are not presently indicted for or otherwise criminally or civilly charged by a governmental entity (Federal, State, or Local) with the commission of any of the offenses enumerated in paragraph (b) of this certification; and
  - iv. have not within a three (3) year period preceding this Proposal had one or more federal, state, or local government transactions terminated for cause or default.

Failure to provide this certification may result in the disqualification of the Applicant's Proposal at the discretion of MCA.