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A Mississippi Nonprofit Corporation

**Mississippi Center for Justice's Comments to BEAM's Digital
Skills and Accessibility Plan**

Executive Summary

Since 2023, the Mississippi Center for Justice has advocated for the BEAM office to engage in proper stakeholder engagement, community-focused grant programming, and data transparency. The Digital Skills and Accessibility Plan does not reflect these principles and is a continuation of BEAM's policy to design a grant process that will only close the digital divide for a privileged minority. BEAM should revise its needs assessment and implementation strategy to better serve Mississippi's covered populations.

MCJ's Concerns with the Digital Skills and Accessibility Plan are:

1. BEAM's needs assessment ignores the digital equity needs and barriers of Mississippi's racial and ethnic minorities.
2. BEAM does not design a state-level implementation strategy to assist with broadband affordability and instead relies on federal programs with limited range and lifespans.
3. BEAM does not provide technical assistance for communities, despite acknowledging communities' lack of digital skills and accessibility planning.
4. BEAM's stakeholder engagement has resulted in digital skills and accessibility focus groups with as few as six attendees and speed test results for less than one percent of Mississippi households.
5. BEAM does not design an implementation strategy to assist community anchor institutions even though recent reports indicate Mississippi CAIs struggle with connectivity.

Introduction

The Mississippi Center for Justice (MCJ) is a non-profit public interest law firm dedicated to advancing racial and economic justice through direct legal services and advocacy campaigns. Digital equity is an issue that connects our five advocacy campaigns as access to affordable, reliable broadband internet is necessary for obtaining the resources to advance racial and economic justice. Since 2023, MCJ has advocated both to the federal government and to the Broadband Expansion and Accessibility of Mississippi (BEAM) office about the need to center digital equity in the upcoming Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) grant program. The BEAD grant program represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to achieve universal broadband access in one of the least connected states in the nation. If Mississippi does not focus digital equity in its BEAD grant process, then thousands of Mississippians will remain in the digital divide once the grant program ends.

MCJ has participated in BEAM's comment process for the BEAD grant program by submitting comments to the Five-Year Action Plan, the Initial Proposal Volume 1, and the Initial Proposal Volume 2.¹ Within these comments, MCJ voiced concerns that BEAM was not designing a community-focused grant program with proper stakeholder engagement and data transparency. It was MCJ's hope that such concerns would be addressed in BEAM's Digital Skills and Accessibility Plan, a plan that will work in conjunction with the BEAD grant process. MCJ is disappointed to observe that our concerns have not been addressed in the Plan.

Instead, BEAM is continuing to design grant programs that will only favor a privileged minority in Mississippi at the expense of all Mississippians.

Concerns with the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan's Needs Assessment

Insufficient Needs Assessment

MCJ determines the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan to be an insufficient analysis of Mississippi's covered populations' barriers and needs. According to the Notice of Funding Opportunity for the State Digital Equity Planning Grant, states must conduct a comprehensive needs assessment that identifies both general barriers to digital equity and unique barriers to digital equity for each covered population. However, BEAM provides a four-point bulleted list of barriers for each covered population, and BEAM does not provide explanatory information for these bullets. Most of these bullets are listed repeatedly for each covered population.

MCJ finds this bulleted list to not be comprehensive of the covered populations' barriers. Our organization has provided services for several of these covered populations, and we have encountered digital equity needs and barriers that are not listed in the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan. Below are some of the barriers MCJ has witnessed in its work. Some barriers are unique to specific covered populations, and some barriers are general for all covered populations. These barriers must be acknowledged in the needs assessment and properly addressed BEAM's implementation of the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan.

- Schools' remote learning resources lacking assistive technical aids for students with disabilities

- School buildings having unreliable broadband connections
- Recent closures of libraries and other community anchor institutions preventing residents from accessing devices
- Individuals' reliance on smartphones in areas with poor cell phone coverage due to lack of alternatives in broadband service options
- Individuals reliant on cell phones struggling to complete applications for services
- Communities' available broadband service offerings having unreliable connections
- Individuals held at MDOC facilities being denied access to the internet, including for purposes and means proven in federal and other state facilities to be safe and secure
- Government agencies, specifically USDA, being reliant on online media instead of direct mail to announce programs which prevents disconnected individuals from learning about these programs

Additionally, the Plan's bulleted list fails to incorporate the context in which these digital equity barriers and needs exist. Many individuals in these covered populations live in food deserts, banking deserts, hospital deserts, and other resource-related deserts as well as areas with poor economic development and high-need school districts. Digital inequities exacerbate these other inequities and vice versa. Any needs assessment that BEAM creates must acknowledge these

contextual barriers, and BEAM must devise a strategy that addresses how to overcome these contextual barriers as it addresses Mississippi's digital inequities.

Lack of Focus on Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Needs Assessment

One aspect of the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan's needs assessment that alarms MCJ is the Plan's lack of focus on the needs, digital equity barriers, and contextual barriers of Mississippi's racial and ethnic minorities. Mississippi has a history of racial segregation that has resulted in racial disparities in infrastructure and resources. One can look towards the City of Jackson's crises with water infrastructure or the disparities in school funding to witness how infrastructure and resource inequities relate to Mississippi's racial and ethnic demographics.

This phenomenon extends to broadband infrastructure and digital skills. Research across the United States has proven a relationship between digital inequity and racial and ethnic minorities. Communities with high concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to have access to affordable, reliable broadband technology. These trends are not just general but localized to an area. When these studies have observed affordable broadband access in a single location such as a city, researchers have found that access followed historical redlining of the location's neighborhoods. Research has also proven that this relationship exists within Mississippi specifically, regardless of whether members of racial and ethnic minorities live in rural areas or urban areas of the state.² BEAM should acknowledge Mississippi's racial disparities in the needs assessment and incorporate the unique barriers of Mississippi's racial and ethnic minorities into its implementation strategy. By ignoring demographics' relationship with digital equity,

BEAM is creating an incomplete needs assessment which would lead to a superficial digital skills and accessibility implementation strategy.

MCJ finds it appropriate to highlight how it is already witnessing the consequences of BEAM's inability to consider racial and ethnic minorities' needs and barriers in its approach towards digital skills and accessibility. Since early 2023, MCJ has advocated for the need for broadband infrastructure in the Delta, a region with the highest concentration of Black residents in Mississippi. MCJ has worked extensively in the Delta and has witnessed first-hand how digital inequities are harming Delta residents' lives. Some of the concerns that MCJ has expressed to BEAM and other organizations are the lack of accurate broadband access mapping of the Delta and the lack of stakeholder engagement with Delta communities.

In a September 2023 interview, BEAM dismissed digital equity concerns for the Delta by stating that the region was not the "worst off".³ BEAM cited regional electric cooperatives as the reason for the Delta's lack of need. Electric cooperatives are an institution that has a history of racism and undemocratic practices in the Delta.⁴ MCJ witnessed Delta residents express concerns to BEAM about the office's reliance on electric cooperatives at the MCJ-hosted community engagement meeting in March 2023.

Since this September 2023 interview, MCJ has observed that BEAM only listed one Delta county in the Five-Year Action Plan's list of most unserved counties, intends to designate all of the Delta as either high-cost or extremely high-cost for the BEAD grant process, and is organizing only one local planning meeting in the

Delta. MCJ is concerned that by failing to identify and acknowledge the needs and barriers of racial and ethnic minorities in the Delta and all of Mississippi, BEAM is designing a Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan that would fail to achieve digital equity.

Lack of Focus on Climate Resiliency in Needs Assessment

MCJ is disappointed to observe that the needs assessment does not mention climate resiliency as it relates to the covered populations, especially the rural population. Mississippi regularly experiences severe weather, and the lack of climate resilient broadband technology creates a barrier to digital equity for the state. Severe weather requires residents having up-to-date information on their surroundings. Proper warning is often the difference between dying and surviving severe weather. Reporters have observed that rural residents across the United States struggle to get adequate severe weather emergency alerts due to poor broadband access.⁵ The recent March 2023 tornado in Rolling Fork proves that Mississippi's rural residents do not receive severe weather emergency alerts and that the alternatives to broadband technology are ineffective. Many Rolling Fork residents stated that they did not receive an alert on their cell phone, nor did they hear the town's tornado siren.⁶

The aftermath of the March 2023 tornado further highlights the need for climate resiliency in the Plan's needs assessment. Most of the assistance provided to the tornado's survivors was reliant on the survivors completing an online application. If the region's broadband technology failed to withstand the tornado, then survivors would be unable to assess the online application. MCJ hosted clinics in the region

to assist survivors but encountered connectivity issues that inhibited the assistance our organization could provide.

MCJ recommends that BEAM include analysis on climate resiliency into the Plan's needs assessment and design an implementation strategy that ensures all Mississippians have broadband access both during and after a natural disaster. There is a possibility that another tragedy such as the March 2023 tornado will happen again in Mississippi. Rural Mississippians must have no digital barriers to warnings and assistance when such an event happens.

MCJ stresses that BEAM's implementation strategy should also include climate resilient broadband for Mississippi's high-cost and extremely high-cost locations. While BEAM has not yet revealed guidelines for providing broadband technology to high-cost and extremely high-cost areas, the office has suggested satellite and fixed wireless technology as possibilities.⁷ Severe weather can disrupt both technologies' internet connection.

Concerns with the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan's Implementation

Strategy

No State-Level Implementation Strategy to Address Affordability

The Digital Equity Act Planning Grant's Notice of Funding Opportunity requires states to devise a holistic implementation strategy that adequately addresses covered populations' needs and barriers. After reviewing BEAM's implementation strategy in the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan, MCJ argues that the Plan's implementation strategy is missing key elements to properly assist Mississippi's covered populations. The Plan's strategy lacks state-level programs and strategies

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to address the affordability barrier. A recent study found that only one-third of Mississippians have access to affordable broadband technology.⁸ BEAM's needs assessment corroborates this study as every covered population lists the high cost of broadband as a need. However, instead of designing an implementation strategy that directly addresses affordability, BEAM insteads relies on existing federal programs, specifically the Affordable Connectivity Program and the BEAD grant program, to address affordability. MCJ is concerned by BEAM's inaction, given recent BEAM statements that disregarded the digital inequities experienced by low-income communities in Mississippi.⁹

Relying on the ACP and the BEAD grant program to address affordability is an ineffective strategy. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced in January 2024 that the Commission will soon begin a wind-down of ACP, which includes a freezing of ACP enrollment in February 2024.¹⁰ While Congress has introduced a bill to provide ACP with additional funding, and MCJ is hopeful that the bill will be approved, this funding bill is a temporary solution. Congress has not yet created a long-term solution to fund ACP. Therefore, ACP may not be available for Mississippians when BEAM begins implementing its Digital Skills & Accessibility implementation strategy.

Even if ACP is still available, the program will not be available to all Mississippians, as only a select few providers participate in the program. MCJ has encountered in its ACP outreach Delta communities that experience broadband affordability issues but cannot benefit from ACP due to ISP non-participation. BEAM has stated its ACP outreach will focus in areas receiving broadband infrastructure grants,

which further limits the communities that will benefit from BEAM's strategy.¹¹

BEAM's website is unable to reach communities beyond these grant areas as BEAM has not had a working ACP webpage since December 2022.¹² MCJ stresses that the ACP webpage works when selected from the Resources tab's drop-down menu, but not when selected from the Resources webpage. The drop-down menu is only available after an individual selects the Resources webpage.

The BEAD grant program is also not an effective strategy because BEAM will only implement the grant program in select locations within the state. Federal law prohibits BEAM from awarding BEAD grant awards in locations previously funded with federal grant funds and locations with 100 Mbps download speeds and 20 Mbps upload speeds. There will be residents experiencing affordability issues in these locations.

The Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan does not indicate whether the BEAD grant program will include the necessary components to properly address affordability. The Plan states that BEAM still has not finalized the BEAD grant program's low-cost service plan pricing. MCJ questions the quality of BEAM's proposed low-cost service plan pricing. In its comments to the Initial Proposal Volume 2, MCJ addressed that BEAM's current strategy did not guarantee an affordable broadband option for low-income families. BEAM has also stated in meetings on the BEAD grant program that a possible broadband offering for high-cost and extremely high-cost locations would be Starlink, a broadband technology with installation prices starting at \$599 and subscription costs starting at \$120 a month.

BEAM has suggested possibly subsidizing the broadband service but has not provided details on the subsidization's amount.¹³

MCJ has analyzed other states' Digital Equity Plans, and these plans highlight two possible state-level implementation strategies that can ensure all Mississippians have access to affordable broadband. BEAM can develop its own affordability program that either supplements or replaces the existing ACP. BEAM can also develop a strategy to encourage more low-income service offerings at all ISPs, regardless of ACP or BEAM participation. MCJ notes that these strategies exist within the Digital Equity Plans of Alabama, Kansas, and Louisiana, and Maryland has already designed an affordability plan that supplements ACP.

No Implementation Strategy to Address CAI Connectivity

MCJ is disappointed to not find an implementation strategy that prioritizes connectivity for community anchor institutions (CAIs). MCJ has observed that other states such as Arkansas and North Carolina have included CAI connectivity into its Digital Equity Plans' visions and implementation strategies. However, BEAM does not include CAI connectivity in its Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan.

MCJ has previously commented to BEAM about the need for connectivity assistance for CAIs, specifically schools. MCJ found in its research on education during the Covid-19 pandemic that school buildings in the Delta struggled to maintain a reliable online connection for virtual learning. When MCJ hosted BEAM for a community engagement meeting in Indianola in March 2023, teachers and principals spoke to BEAM about how their school buildings would lose connection during days with no inclement weather and how they would need to cut the

broadband connection in certain parts of the building in order to maintain a reliable broadband connection for state testing. Despite our advocacy, BEAM did not list a strategy in its Initial Proposal Volume 2 to address school connectivity and instead stated that these connectivity issues stem from schools choosing to not participate in a state contract. A 2023 report from the Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER) indicates that school connectivity issues are not a matter of school choice but part of a larger statewide problem, as a sample of 30 school districts revealed Mississippi school districts to have broadband speeds up to 20 times lower than neighboring states.¹⁴

If Mississippi schools are struggling with broadband connectivity, then other Mississippi CAIs may also struggle with maintaining a reliable, high-speed broadband connection. MCJ recommends that BEAM design an implementation strategy that prioritizes gigabit service for all CAIs in Mississippi. CAIs cannot provide online public resources, digital skills training, and digital inclusion tools if these institutions cannot connect to the internet at adequate speeds. By prioritizing CAI connectivity, BEAM is ensuring a successful Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan.

No Technical Assistance Program for Communities

MCJ is concerned that BEAM provides no implementation strategy to address the lack of digital skills and accessibility plans existing in Mississippi. The lack of digital skills and accessibility plans amongst communities indicate that communities are unprepared for BEAM's upcoming implementation strategy. Communities are a necessary partner for BEAM to utilize as communities best understand the unique

barriers and needs of covered populations in their areas. Unprepared communities will hinder BEAM's implementation activities.

As MCJ has stated in its previous comments, communities need technical assistance from the BEAM office as the BEAD grant program progresses. Without technical assistance, under resourced and sparsely staffed municipality and county offices will be unable to ensure that their communities' broadband needs are adequately served. Based on BEAM's findings in the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan, MCJ argues the need for technical assistance extends to digital skills and digital inclusion activities as well. MCJ recommends BEAM to provide technical assistance for communities that wish to devise its own digital skills & accessibility plan. Without such assistance, BEAM's implementation strategy will result in its implementation activities being concentrated in well-resourced, high-income communities. A significant portion of Mississippi's covered population will then remain overlooked.

Implementation Strategy's Overreliance on Maps

MCJ is concerned with BEAM's primary method of communicating state digital skills and device-related resources being a map. BEAM's previous maps have been ineffective with conveying information to the public. The BEAD Preliminary Map presents technical information without a legend or glossary to define terms for individuals unfamiliar with broadband technology. A review of BEAM's social media accounts reveal individuals who have voiced concerns with the map's readability.¹⁵ The map for the Capital Projects Fund's preliminary awards fails to convey relevant information to the public. This map displays awarded areas, but

when an individual clicks to see details on a specific awarded area, the map only displays the selected location's coordinates.¹⁶ The public cannot learn which provider potentially won a grant in their area by coordinates.

MCJ recommends that BEAM adopts other methods alongside its map to present Mississippi's digital skills and device-related resources. MCJ also recommends that BEAM redesign its website for easy access to these resources. BEAM had stated in a September 2023 meeting that the process for accessing its online maps was "convoluted".¹⁷ MCJ has yet to observe any significant alterations to the website and has found accessing maps following this meeting to still be difficult.

Concerns with Stakeholder Engagement and Outreach

Stakeholder Engagement Failed to Encompass the State

MCJ has previously stated in its comments that BEAM stakeholder engagement was insufficient for the BEAD grant process. According to the NTIA, both the BEAD grant program and the Digital Equity Act programs require robust stakeholder engagement with a diverse set of organizations.¹⁸ BEAD's Notice of Funding Opportunity describes robust stakeholder engagement, among other requirements, as engagement that encompasses the geographic coverage of the state, includes marginalized communities, and is transparent.¹⁹ Based on the information provided in the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan, MCJ reiterates that BEAM has not conducted satisfactory stakeholder engagement.

BEAM presented in the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan an undetailed map of BEAM community engagement meetings as evidence of its collaboration and stakeholder engagement for the Plan. MCJ notes that the map lists 46 events

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while the Plan states that BEAM has conducted “more than twenty community engagement meetings”. This map shows that BEAM’s meetings did not encompass the state of Mississippi. Twenty-one meetings, nearly one-half of the mapped meetings, are in just seven locations.

MCJ assumes that the map lists data similarly presented in the Five-Year Action Plan and the BEAD Initial Proposal Volume 2. MCJ proved in its comments to these documents that BEAM did not encompass the geographic coverage of the state. MCJ concluded that BEAM focused its engagement in certain areas of the state such as Biloxi, Brookhaven, and Jackson. Analysis of the Five-Year Action Plan found a tenth of BEAM’s community engagement and administrative meetings occurring in Hinds County, and analysis of the BEAD Initial Proposal found nearly a third of its engagement events occurring in Hinds County.

MCJ also argued in its comments that BEAM did not focus its community engagement meetings and stakeholder engagement events in majority unserved communities. According to the data presented in the Five-Year Action Plan, BEAM only conducted a quarter of its community engagement meetings in majority unserved communities. According to data presented in the BEAD Initial Proposal Volume 2, BEAM conducted less than ten percent of its non-media stakeholder engagement events in majority unserved communities. MCJ further argued that unserved communities could not participate in engagement events in other regions of the state because analysis of BEAM’s data found that fewer than five non-media stakeholder engagement events were reported on both of BEAM’s social media accounts with over 72 hours’ notice.

Data presented within the Plan itself indicates that BEAM has failed to reach the entirety of the state. According to the Plan, BEAM has gathered less than 10,500 speed tests after a year of outreach. BEAM's total speed tests represent less than one percent of Mississippi's households. The focus groups specifically for the Plan had less than 40 attendees at each individual event with some focus groups having as few as six attendees.

Stakeholder Engagement Failed to Include Certain Marginalized Communities

As MCJ has stated in its previous comments, BEAM has failed to include certain communities in its engagement. Of particular concern is the lack of engagement with the incarcerated community, as this community is a covered population according to the Digital Equity Act of 2021. MCJ reiterates that the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) is not an acceptable representative for the incarcerated community on BEAM's Core Planning Team. MCJ noted in its comments to the BEAD Initial Proposal Volume 2 that BEAM's Local Coordination Tracker did not list an engagement event that reached the incarcerated community.

The data presented within the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan does not prove adequate engagement with the incarcerated community. BEAM lists certain organizations such as Mississippi Library Commission as providing resources to the incarcerated community but does not explain what resources these organizations provide to this community in the Plan's appendices. MCJ does not observe any listed organization that is directly focused on the needs of the

incarcerated community. MCJ questions the level of engagement BEAM has conducted with other marginalized communities based on these observations.

Lack of Transparency in Stakeholder Engagement

MCJ has repeatedly commented to BEAM that the office has not been transparent with its stakeholder engagement. MCJ is continuing to observe transparency issues. BEAM's reliance on the Five-Year Action Plan to provide information on its media engagement events is unacceptable. MCJ has proven in its previous comments that both the Five-Year Action Plan and the Local Engagement Tracker failed to include all of BEAM's media engagement events as well as all of BEAM's stakeholder engagement events. MCJ notes that of the media engagement events that BEAM shared in the Plan, two events, the Capital B interview and a December 19, 2023 WLBT interview, were not publicized on BEAM's website or social media, and the Mississippi Today podcast was missing in the Local Coordination Tracker and the Five-Year Action Plan.

BEAM's transparency issues extend to engagement events exclusive to the Digital Skills and Accessibility Plan. BEAM failed to notify the public on the focus groups listed in the Plan. BEAM released a July 21, 2023 Facebook post stating it had partnered with Mississippi's community colleges and universities for focus groups, but the office posted this news after several focus groups had concluded and provided no information on upcoming focus group events.²⁰ The Plan states that the Core Planning Team meets once a month, yet the Local Coordination Tracker only lists Core Planning Team meetings until November 2022. Additionally, a recent roundtable event revealed an October 2023 meeting with the Core Planning

Team that the Local Coordination Tracker does not include, and BEAM participated in a December 2023 meeting with the Coalition for Digital Accessibility that the office has not yet publicized on its website or social media.²¹

Inconsistency in Stakeholder Engagement Data

MCJ has documented in its previous comments that data inconsistencies exist within BEAM's stakeholder engagement data. For example, organizations with which BEAM claimed to be engaged are listed in the BEAD Initial Proposal Volume I but not in the Local Coordination Tracker, and the Mississippi Broadband Association's website link in the Local Coordination Tracker is for a website affiliated with Ready.net, a BEAM contractor. MCJ has argued that these inconsistencies indicate transparency issues.

MCJ is disappointed to still be viewing data inconsistencies in the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan. The digital assets inventory lists Sunflower County Library Systems five times. The Plan states that BEAM conducted more than 20 community engagement meetings. However, the Plan's map lists 46 community engagement meetings and the BEAD Initial Proposal Volume 2 submitted to the NTIA states BEAM has conducted more than 60 community engagement meetings.²²

MCJ also observes data inconsistencies when comparing the Plan to previous BEAM documents and statements. Eleven of the digital skills organizations with which BEAM claims to establish partnerships are not listed in the Local Coordination Tracker. The Plan states that BEAM had generated 10,263 speed tests by November 2023 but claimed in a May 2023 event that the office had

generated 15,000 speed tests.²³ In a September 2023 meeting, BEAM stated that the office had generated 5,000 speed tests, which would suggest an increase of 5,263 speed tests within two months.²⁴ MCJ questions the likelihood of this possible increase.

MCJ is most concerned that while the Plan states that no digital skills and accessibility plans exist within Mississippi, the Local Coordination Tracker states that the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI) has a plan and that BEAM will incorporate this plan into its Digital Skills and Accessibility Plan.²⁵ A BEAM document further states that MBCI has affordability and digital inclusion activities. BEAM has also shared one such activity via one of its social media accounts.²⁶

Lack of Stakeholder Engagement Methodology

MCJ has previously requested BEAM to provide its methodology for conducting stakeholder engagement. MCJ requested this methodology because MCJ has observed evidence that suggests BEAM's engagement may not prioritize Mississippi's unserved and underserved communities and instead prioritize certain individuals such as local politicians and BEAM employees. MCJ has also voiced concerns with the trust barrier that exists between marginalized communities and state government agencies such as BEAM. MCJ is disappointed to not view a methodology in the Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan. A methodology could dissuade those concerns. MCJ also notes that there is no mention of its methodology on its website nor is there a public invitation to have an engagement meeting with BEAM.

Need to Revise BEAM Stakeholder Engagement and Outreach Strategy

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MCJ has been voicing its concerns on BEAM stakeholder engagement and outreach strategy to BEAM and the federal government since early 2023. MCJ had witnessed evidence with BEAM's initial December 2022 community engagement meetings that the office was failing to provide timely, transparent invitations to its engagement events. However, BEAM has not changed its strategy.

The Digital Skills and Accessibility Plan reveals how ineffective BEAM's engagement and outreach strategy has been to date. BEAM utilized community colleges and universities to conduct its focus groups, a method one individual stated was an ineffective method to encourage business participation.²⁷ According to Transparency Mississippi, BEAM provided each community college and university \$15,000 in Digital Skills & Accessibility grant funds. MCJ assumes these funds were related to the focus groups. Therefore, BEAM expended a total of \$345,000 for focus groups that averaged less than 25 attendees.

BEAM has conducted outreach on its speed test largely using social media and word-of-mouth at its engagement meetings. MCJ has found little evidence of BEAM utilizing other forms of media to promote the speed test. BEAM contracted Ready.net to design the speed test, and in its proposal to BEAM, Ready.net stated traditional forms of media such as radio and television were essential tools for conducting outreach on speed tests and capturing speed test data.²⁸ As MCJ has previously stated, BEAM has generated speed tests for less than one percent of Mississippi households after nearly a year of outreach. According to Transparency Mississippi, Ready.net has numerous duties alongside managing speed test resources in a contract that amounts to over \$1.9 million. MCJ notes that

Ready.net is the contractor for designing the maps that MCJ has argued suffer from readability issues.

Despite these results, BEAM is still engaging in poor engagement and outreach. BEAM has organized Local Planning meetings for the upcoming BEAD challenge process with the Mississippi Association of Planning and Development Districts, another institution that may deter certain organizations from attending. Most of these events are at the offices of individual planning and development districts (PDD). These districts are not equally distributed across the state, which creates a travel barrier for residents who wish to attend. MCJ questions if BEAM will expand these meetings beyond the PDDS. MCJ notes that not all of these scheduled meetings are at a PDD office. The meeting with Southwest Mississippi PDD was at the Natchez Grand Hotel, and the meeting with the Three Rivers PDD was at the Cadence Bank Conference Center. BEAM has not provided an explanation for why these meetings are at these venues. A BEAM social media comment first revealed a webinar that was not listed in the meetings' initial announcement.²⁹

These meetings were first announced on December 22, three days before the Christmas holidays. Since this first announcement, BEAM has conducted outreach that presented the list of meetings in alphabetical order instead of the more understandable chronological order.³⁰ BEAM's executive director has utilized her social media account to document individual meetings instead of BEAM's official social media accounts.³¹ BEAM failed to publicize an engagement event at the Mississippi Municipal League that MCJ suspects is related to the challenge process and did not publicize until afterwards a meeting with Senatobia Rotary

Club discussing the challenge process.³² BEAM also delayed notifying the public about its rescheduled meetings until January 24, 2024 despite listing the rescheduled event as early as January 18, 2024. At that time, BEAM did not utilize all of its media resources to notify the public as the office only used email and one of its social media accounts to announce the rescheduled meeting.

MCJ is concerned that based on these observations, BEAM's engagement with the challenge process will reach as few Mississippi residents as its previous outreach and engagement campaigns. MCJ recommends that BEAM revise its stakeholder engagement and outreach strategy so that BEAM will reach all Mississippians, especially its covered populations. Otherwise, BEAM will expend millions of taxpayer money for minimal results.

Conclusion

The concerns and recommendations MCJ lists in these comments are not unique to this document. MCJ has been voicing these subjects both in previous comment periods and directly to BEAM. However, MCJ continues to observe an office that does not adopt our recommendations or adequately addresses our concerns. The Digital Skills & Accessibility Plan is insufficient because the Plan prioritizes a privileged minority rather than Mississippians who suffer the most acutely from the digital divide. If BEAM enacts the Plan's implementation strategy as is, then BEAM will implement a strategy that exacerbates Mississippi's racial and socioeconomic inequities and will fail to establish digital equity in the state.

¹ Mississippi Center for Justice. Mississippi Center for Justice's Comments to BEAM's Five Year Action Plan. (2023, September 25).

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² Harrison, Dr. Dominique. (2021, October 6). "Affordability & Availability: Expanding Broadband in the Black Rural South". Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Yin, Leon and Aaron Sankin. (October 19, 2022). "Dollars to Megabits, You May Be Paying 400 Times As Much As Your Neighbor for Internet Service". The Markup. Accessed October 19, 2022. <https://themarkup.org/still-loading/2022/10/19/dollars-to-megabits-you-may-be-paying-400-times-as-much-as-your-neighbor-for-internet-service>.

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⁴ Henry Leifermann with Pat Wehner. (1996). "A Question of Power: Race and Democracy in Rural Electric co-ops". Southern Changes: The Journal of the Southern Regional Council, 1978-2003. Vol. 18, No.. 3-4, pp. 3-15. Accessed September 28, 2022.

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