

Addressing Military Veterans' Economic, Broadband Needs

State and local governments can leverage \$350 billion in federal funding to provide immediate relief and long-term support for U.S. veterans and military spouses.

By Trace Chesser / *USA Cares* and Tom Ferree / *Connected Nation*

The Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds recently allocated \$350 billion across states, territories and tribal governments to use for COVID-19–related economic recovery activities. U.S. leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to help veterans and military spouses in their states, counties and cities, but they must act now.

Before delving into exactly how these funds can be used, it is important to understand just how much is available in each area, allowing it to be compounded to create truly impactful investment.

For instance, Anniston, Alabama, was awarded \$13,291,868. The town of about 21,000 is in Calhoun County, which received another \$22,066,439. On top of that, the state of Alabama was awarded \$2,120,279,417 (that's *billions*). More funding is available to 20 other cities and nearly 70 additional counties in Alabama.

That's a lot of money that can be leveraged at all levels in just one state. It is the same story in Indiana, Tennessee, Wyoming and every state in the U.S. If the country's leaders are strategic in working together, they can use those funds to create lasting and positive impact.

IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM SUPPORT

Two nonprofit organizations, USA Cares and Connected Nation, are asking leaders to consider using a portion of these funds for a critical

need: providing immediate relief and long-term support for veterans and military spouses.

The \$350 billion was set aside as part of the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act. According to a U.S. Treasury Department fact sheet, this money can be used to respond to the "COVID-19 emergency and bring back jobs."

Even before the pandemic, USA Cares worked daily with veterans struggling with financial needs and other challenges that made adapting to life outside the military difficult.

These services focus on improving the quality of life for veterans and reducing the potential factors that can contribute to veteran suicide. Many of the needs USA Cares helps veterans meet are urgent and immediate, such as rent or utility assistance.

At the same time, Connected Nation, dedicated to helping local communities, states, and federal agencies create and implement solutions to their broadband and digital technology gaps, is setting up veterans and military spouses for long-term success through its Digital Works program. It provides digital career training and job placement assistance with an employer network of more than 70 national companies.

Many veterans are uniquely suited for remote work: they are self-disciplined and detail-oriented because of their military training. At the same time, military spouses have traditionally had some of the highest unemployment numbers in the country. Employers are reticent to hire them

because their spouses may be deployed to new locations without much warning and, if they work, there is often a lag time between moving and finding a new job. Remote work can help solve those long-term issues for veterans and military spouses, and it is also pandemic-proof.

A TWOFOLD APPROACH

The important takeaway for the nation's leaders is that helping veterans and military families requires a twofold approach. It's important to first address their immediate and urgent needs, then set them up for long-term success.

Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds provide enough money to address both needs and still tackle other issues, such as expanding broadband access to more people, another priority of Connected Nation.

According to the Treasury Department, the funds can be used for "serving the hardest-hit communities

COVID-19 relief money can fund digital career training so veterans and military spouses are skilled for remote work.

and families." This includes those urgent and immediate needs previously mentioned, such as food, housing and other financial insecurities. USA Cares can help provide a pipeline to veterans facing the greatest challenges.

The Treasury Department also highlights the need for "addressing the negative economic impacts caused by the public health emergency." We believe this should include a workforce development effort – such as Digital Works – that focuses career readiness on remote work skills and opportunities. This should include an emphasis on veterans and military

spouses by working together with organizations such as USA Cares.

Let's not let this opportunity to create long-term, positive impact in the lives of those who have served and the families who support them pass by. We implore U.S. leaders to act now!

Find more details, including how to apply for the funds, here: <https://connectednation.org/current-broadband-funding>. ❖

Trace Chesser is the president and CEO of USA Cares and Tom Ferree is the CEO and chairman of Connected Nation.



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