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USDA Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grant: Healthcare Focus

Webinar Transcript • February 25, 2026

Presented by Ashley Schultz and Amber Walker • Grants Office, LLC

Welcome and Introductions

Ashley Schultz:
Hello, everyone, and welcome to our event. My name is Ashley Schultz. I am the Manager of Community Engagement here at Grants Office. Today we are going to be discussing the Distance Learning and Telemedicine program, or DLT, which offers between $40 million and $60 million each year to help improve education and healthcare in rural areas of the U.S.

This event we are about to start here is going to focus exclusively on telemedicine projects under this grant. If you are on here today interested in pursuing education and distance learning initiatives under DLT, we actually hosted a session yesterday that was dedicated to applicants from institutes of higher education, K-12s, and other nonprofit education providers. So if that sounds like you, head back over to grantsoffice.com where you found this event and look for that education-specific one. Otherwise, welcome to today's event on the healthcare portion of this program.

I want to take a quick moment to just express our own excitement for today's session. This is our third in a series of events that we are hosting in 2026 to focus on a specific grant program. As you all know, we do dozens of webinars throughout the year on grant-seeking advice in general. But the purpose of this session is actually to get far more granular on our information and our grant-seeking advice so that we can focus a full 30 to 40 minutes on just one grant that is relevant for this time of year. So I very much hope you enjoy today's event, and if you have any feedback about this new type, please do reach out to us at education@grantsoffice.com so we can hear from you.

I would also encourage those of you in the audience today who are representing a healthcare entity to consider who else among your peers may benefit from today's session, and then pass along the recording to them. As Amber is going to detail in a few minutes, this is a very competitive grant program, so the more folks who can learn about DLT, get themselves a competitive application, and secure grant funding for rural medicine projects, the better.

Housekeeping

Ashley Schultz:
Last two things before we get started, I have just some housekeeping for you. First and foremost, you can ask questions at any time during today's event using the question-and-answer interface at the bottom right-hand corner of your screen. Feel free to submit as many questions as you would like, and we will get to them at the end of today's presentation.

Two, know that the session is being recorded. The recording is going to be available for download at the Grants Office website starting tomorrow. The PowerPoint slides for today's session are also going to be available in that spot, and for the very first time, we are offering all attendees a step-by-step application workbook for the DLT grant. We will talk about that workbook here shortly, but I am just letting you know now that it is going to be available for downloading in the same spot as the slides and this session's recording.

Today's Speaker and Agenda

Ashley Schultz:
So again, today we are talking about the Distance Learning and Telemedicine grant. It is offered by the USDA. I am joined today by Amber Walker, Grants Development Consultant here at Grants Office. Amber oversees all healthcare funding in the United States for our team and is one of our in-house experts on DLT funding. She has helped dozens of organizations just like yours to navigate the ins and outs of DLT. And if you are a regular reader of our free magazine FUNDED, you are going to recognize Amber from her recent series on grant-seeking from the unique perspective of grant writers in the healthcare industry. So in short, she has a lot of grants experience, not only on DLT but in terms of healthcare funding more generally. I think you are going to learn a lot from her today.

Here is a quick run-through of our next 30 to 40 minutes together. Once I pass things to Amber, she is going to run through a high-level introduction of the Distance Learning and Telemedicine program — what is it, what is it going to help you pay for, who can go after it. We want to really make sure before we dive into the nitty-gritty details of this grant that it is the right fit for you.

After we have cleared those hurdles, Amber is going to tackle how to prepare a competitive DLT proposal. She will talk about the objective and subjective scoring components and the scoring range that you are going to want to hit in order to realize funding through that program. We will end with a quick overview of some of the additional services that Grants Office can provide you on DLT — whether you need to have someone come in and score your sites, review a draft of your proposal, or maybe you want someone to come actually put pen to paper on your behalf and write the narrative for you. So with that, I am going to pass things over to the very capable hands of Amber to get us started.

Program Overview

Amber Walker:
Thanks so much, Ashley. Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for joining us today to learn about the DLT program, and specifically the telemedicine portion of that program. We are going to start off by talking about a high level at the DLT program, the available funding, and what an eligible project might look like.

This program is funded through the USDA, so there is this particular focus on rural communities. The target for this is populations of 20,000 and under, and there is some criteria above that that we will discuss later, but know that the target is populations of 20,000 and less.

Funding Availability

Amber Walker:
The federal budget has allowed for $40 million for this program in fiscal year 2026. We know that $10.76 million is already allocated for congressionally directed spending projects. So the webinar today is going to focus on the other $30 million that is going to be available through competitive grants. Award amounts range quite a bit, from $50,000 up to $1 million, and most projects are coming in at above $100,000, so the award amounts tend to be on the larger side.

Now, although we do not have an application open right now, it is anticipated in the very near future, with the window expected to be about 30 to 45 days. So this is actually a perfect time to be having these conversations because 30 to 45 days is not a huge turnaround time for a large project like DLT. So conversations about this program and what your project could look like that happen before the window opens are only going to set you up for success once that green light goes off and people are starting to compile their proposals.

Eligibility

Amber Walker:
The eligibility for this program is quite wide open. We have listed some examples of eligible healthcare applicants, but this is definitely not an exhaustive list. This is just some of the examples of funded projects.

Hub Sites and End User Sites

Amber Walker:
Most DLT projects are going to follow a really similar structure in how their project is laid out. The DLT program designates two types of sites within this program. There are hub sites and there are end user sites. The hub site can be in an urban area or a rural area, but it is always where a provider is providing

their healthcare services and expertise. An end user site must be in a rural area, and it is where the patient is residing — so where the patient is receiving healthcare expertise.

There can be more than one hub site and there can be many end user sites, but they generally follow this hub-and-spoke model. We kind of think of it as a bike tire where the hub is in the center, and then out from there we find the rural endpoint users.

Now, this is what a basic program looks like. We are going to take a closer look at what it can look like in practice with a healthcare project. A typical example might be a healthcare system that has an urban hospital but a large rural reach in the region surrounding it. Again, these are just some of the types of healthcare entities that can be covered within this program. We have seen previously teledental. We have seen correctional facilities being funded through this program. So if you are providing real-time healthcare services — no matter what they are — to a rural community or a rural endpoint, there is a high likelihood that you could be eligible for this program.

Both hub sites — those urban sites with the providers — and their end user sites where the patients are, are eligible to receive, if needed, equipment to make this program happen and to deliver the healthcare services on both sides of the patient and the provider.

Eligible Technology Expenses

Amber Walker:
We are going to look at what types of technologies can be included within this project. The USDA intentionally does not give an exhaustive list of the type of equipment that can be covered because it is so broad — because there are so many different types of programs and projects that can be covered. They give generalities. So there is no blanket eligibility and there is no blanket ineligibility. It is up to the applicant to justify why the technology is a necessity and crucial to the deployment of the project. But within that, there is lots of opportunity for different types of technology to be covered.

The vast majority of the budget for this grant program is to be used for equipment and technology, and that is both at the hub and end user sites.

The Three Application Components

Amber Walker:
Now that I have covered the high-level program details and generally what a project is going to be structured like and the allowable technology, we can dive a little bit deeper into the components of the actual proposal. We can think about this in three main categories. We have the objective scoring component, the subjective scoring, and the budget and vendor quotes.

Now, the objective scoring is crucial to this project. It is a necessary step in order for your proposal, your project narrative, and your budget to even be looked at. So we recommend completing the application in this order. You really want to make sure your site list — so your hub and end user sites — are all together and you have got them objectively scored before you move forward and put any of your effort and your manpower into the project narrative or the budget, because this is going to kind of make or break the rest of your proposal.

So with the general idea of the program in mind, we are going to take the next steps in evaluating if it is going to be the right fit for your program. This is a crucial step. The DLT program is a very involved application. There are multiple pieces; there is highly detailed information that you need to pull together. The more evaluating you do — whether it is a good fit or not for you — the more set up for success you will be as you move forward with the proposal, if you choose to do so.

We will continue to cover some of those preliminary considerations, but we have also gone ahead and made a workbook for you. This will help you determine if it is the right funding fit, and we will go ahead and talk about that workbook a little bit later on.

Objective Scoring: Rurality and Economic Need

Amber Walker:
First, we will talk about how to determine if your site list is a good fit for this program. When you think about your site list, you think about your hub site — where your provider is — and your end user sites, where your patients are, and you will create a list. Every site that is an end user site will be scored individually. They can receive a rurality score of between 20 and 40 points; the more rural, the higher the score.

I did want to note: earlier in the call I mentioned some criteria around that 20,000 population benchmark. If you are perhaps in a small town or a suburb that is right outside of a larger metro area, it is likely going to be ineligible. You will be considered part of a continuous urban area and not a rural area. So you will want to be double-checking that all of the sites, even if they are under that population, are geographically rural as well.

In addition to those rurality points, you will also receive an economic need score of up to 30 points for every site. And these scores are then averaged. So you will get an average score between 20 and 50 or 60 points, or whatever the average comes out to be.

Objective Scoring: Special Consideration

Amber Walker:
In addition to the specific points for rurality and economic need, there are also additional special consideration bonus points. The special consideration for 2026 is not available yet, but in 2025, this is

what they based those considerations on: the most distressed tier of the Distressed Communities Index, as well as communities with social vulnerability according to an index, tribal lands, and projects that included tribes in their service area.

The special consideration points are really a use-it-or-lose-it type of situation. Whether you have one site that qualifies for bonus points or five sites that qualify for bonus points, you will only be able to receive 10 points in total.

What Counts as a Competitive Score

Amber Walker:
Now, I am throwing points and numbers and rurality at you, so on the next slide we are going to go into kind of what that means and how to make sense of all of that. When we think about our site list, those sites are averaged. So say we get an average score of 40, and then one of our sites is eligible for bonus points, so we tag that onto the end — and that is our objective score of a 50.

The USDA will not evaluate proposals or budgets that are attached to site lists that are averaging 20 or less. So if your average score comes up to 20, you will not be considered competitive based on USDA standards. Grants Office recommends an objective score of 50 or above out of the possible 80 to be considered a competitive applicant.

If you are in that gray area where you are at 40, 45, 46, 47, please continue to consider any modifications you might be able to make to easily bump you up over that 50. For instance, if you have five sites where their individual rurality scores were 40, and then you have one score at a 20, you may consider removing that site that is bringing your score down. Conversely, if you have any sites that were not considered originally — or maybe you have a partner with a very rural site, and it makes sense to add — you may do so to bring that score up. You do not want to reinvent the wheel just to get that competitive score up, but if it makes sense, definitely consider that.

Now, as I stated earlier, there are hub sites, end user sites, and there are hybrid hub/end user sites. Hub sites are not considered part of this total score. They can be in an urban area, and so for that reason, they are not considered in the rurality. If you have a hybrid hub/end user site that is being considered in that overall average and pulling it back to be strictly a hub — and thus not considered — maybe that will make you more competitive. These are some of the considerations you can take to play around with those scores.

Again, if you are at a 25, there is probably not a lot you can do. But if you are in that 45 range, you may be able to make some changes. If, after all of that, you are still not getting a competitive score, you may want to pivot to another grant. You are in luck — rural healthcare is a major focus of federal funding, and there are more and more opportunities for rural healthcare, including telehealth programs, that are

coming out as time goes on and through this spring, with the Rural Health Transformation Program and other programs coming out through HRSA. I unfortunately do not have time to dive into all of those today, but I say that to say: if DLT is not the right fit, there may be other opportunities for you at this time. Do not spend lots of effort and time and energy into a proposal that is just not going to be a really competitive fit.

Other Factors to Consider

Amber Walker:
So in addition to this objective score, which is crucial to the whole proposal, there are other considerations to take when considering if DLT is going to be a good fit for you. If you can say yes to these four things, there is a good chance that you can have a strong proposal together.

The number one thing is that you are focusing on providing real-time health services to rural Americans. This cannot be like an afterthought of some other project that you have in mind for this equipment. It really does need to be the primary, front-and-center focus of the project.

Do you have collaborators or the internal structures to make this project sustainable, not just for the project period but after it is over? Then you have the site score that is competitive, and you are capable of meeting that match requirement. We will talk a little bit more about the match later on, but that can get people into kind of a sticky situation if they move forward with the application hoping they can get it in time, and then they do not, and then they have to give their award back. So make sure you have got that upfront.

The healthcare focus of this program is very flexible, but one thing that you need to know is that it should be addressing gaps in service, and they will ask for data in the application. They want you to show that you are meeting a need that is not being met yet. So you want to bring your innovative ideas, you want to bring your specialty services, and you really want to think about how you are expanding opportunities and not duplicating services.

Free Application Workbook

Amber Walker:
Once you have confirmed it is a good fit — you can say yes to all these things — we do recommend that you check out that workbook that we mentioned earlier on the call. This is going to be a great place for you to start getting your ideas down on paper and really starting to build out your project and drafting your proposal, and really just looking at the different things that are going to go into this application.

This is going to be provided to all of the webinar participants today, and you are free to share this with your colleagues, others in your network, whoever you think might benefit from reviewing this workbook who is considering this project. I will note: this is not necessarily just a general one-size-fits-all

workbook. It was crafted with DLT in mind and the healthcare applicant in mind as well. So we really hope it provides a really sound landing board for all of your ideas and makes you aware of all the components you will need to consider as you are developing your proposal.

Preparing a Competitive Proposal

Amber Walker:
So we have covered how to evaluate if you are a good fit. Next, it is really about diving into the process and beginning that project application. Over the next couple of slides, we will talk about our top tips on what that is going to look like to start getting your competitive proposal together.

Subjective Scoring: The Project Narrative

Amber Walker:
We have talked a lot about the objective scoring, so I am not going to spend too much time on it here. The subjective scoring is the narrative portion. One of my top tips for this is that as a requirement of the application, you need to reach out to your USDA state director. I recommend you do this early in the process. It would be such a shame to spend all of your time and energy crafting this proposal and then the director is on vacation for two weeks and you cannot get a hold of them before submitting. So my tip is just to get that step out of the way early. Do not let it fall off the radar; do not let it wait until the last minute.

The project narrative in and of itself has several sections. The project narrative has some of the typical components you would expect to see, like the scope of work — specific activities and goals — and, as I mentioned, the USDA does want to see data on this, so make sure you are really going detailed here.

They want financial information and sustainability — so talking about the match, if you have partners, developing that cost-sharing agreement. The statement of experience: they want to see you are being good stewards of funds, that you are capable of being good stewards of funds, and so having that ready to go.

And then slightly atypical of a project narrative for this grant is a telecommunication system plan. This is going to be a list of all of your sites, and it is going to include all of the planned equipment, including specifications, that are going to that site. So again, involving your vendors and your consultants early into that conversation is really going to set you up for success. There are a lot of details in these plans, in these system maps, and so the more details that are included, the more room for error. So you really want to make sure you are taking your time and consulting with the experts. I know, for me, I am a grant writer with a grants project background — technology is not my strong suit. So I would definitely be calling in the experts to help me really make sure I know what I am talking about when it comes to those system maps and budget line items.

Budget and Vendor Quotes

Amber Walker:
My tip for the budget: the budget is such a huge piece of this whole project and the proposal, and it is a little bit atypical in that they are asking for details of your equipment. They are looking for detailed line items with costs, model numbers, make numbers, and they are looking for required vendor quotes of the exact planned equipment. So my tip is to talk to your vendors early in the process. Hopefully they are a great resource and they are considered part of your team as you are moving forward with this application, because they are the experts and they are going to really be able to help you along the way with that portion of the application.

The budget considerations, as I have been saying throughout the webinar: the budget for this project is huge because so much of the project is reliant on equipment and technology and those types of expenses. The match requirements are a little bit atypical as well. When we usually think about match, most people think about a cost share. So if you have a $100,000 project, you would think the USDA would give you $85,000 and you would come up with $15,000 for that $100,000. Well, this program — the DLT program — if you have a $115,000 project, that means $100,000 is coming from the USDA and the 15% is coming from you. So it is on top of the ask that makes up the total project cost.

The vendor quotes are required for the exact equipment that will be installed, and it must be quoted in the budget. So that is pretty set in stone. You want to make sure that you have really got to hammer down and you really know what you need before you submit, because making changes after the fact can become difficult.

Again, that system plan map diagram: every site will have their own list of equipment, including the geographic location of the site, and then all of the equipment needed to outfit that site, including hub and end user.

In addition to that, then there are also the detailed line items. You really want to make this as easy as possible for the reviewers, so listing all of your sites in the same order in every section of the proposal is highly, highly recommended, and making it as easy as possible for your USDA reviewers to cross-check and reference different things throughout the proposal is advised.

And finally, clear justifications: everything purchased by this project must be used at least 50% of the time for the services outlined in the proposal. So that does not mean you cannot use it for things outside of the proposal, but it needs to be very clear that the primary purpose of the equipment going to a particular site is for the services that you are identifying in your proposal.

So I know I threw a lot at you, and we do plan to end the call with a questions and answer section, but first I am going to pass it back to Ashley to just talk a little bit more about how Grants Office may be able to help you along the way. With that, I will pass it back to you. Thank you, Ashley.

Grants Office Services

Ashley Schultz:
Thanks so much, Amber, and thank you for all that really excellent information. I am going to give you just a second to grab a glass of water before we hop into that Q&A session. Folks, if you do have some more questions that you have not already asked in the chat, they go in that bottom right-hand corner. It says Q&A. If you do not see it, you may have to click on three dots to find the place to click.

On the Federal Funding Landscape

Ashley Schultz:
First off, I want to just call attention to the number of individuals who have reached out to us this week and over the last two or three months trying to understand what is happening with the U.S. federal budget. While some state and foundation budgets remain relatively stable and reliable forms of funding, we are seeing quite a bit of discourse surrounding how and when the U.S. federal government provides its grants. Just a lot of conflicting information coming out of the White House and Congress, cabinet members, federal agency heads, and other representatives. It can be incredibly challenging to keep track of.

If you have not already done so, I definitely encourage you to check out our website under the Guidance for Grant Seekers tab. We have a series of 5-minute videos on the U.S. federal budget there — what has passed, what has not passed, how much funding is available, what changes are we seeing in the grant funding landscape, etc. All those videos are available to you on demand and are completely free on our website right now.

Grant Writing and Editing Services

Ashley Schultz:
I also want to call out Grants Office's grant writing and editing services that I referred to at the beginning of today's event. The team here is filled with folks just like Amber. We have a 25-year reputation across both the U.S. and Canada for proposal development work. So we help organizations just like yours to plan out and then articulate your project in a way that is going to speak to the funder's goals and objectives.

If you followed along with today's session and you think you are going to apply to DLT but you want to have some additional assistance to help you get across that finish line, please do not hesitate to reach

out to Amber and the team here. We offer full proposal development and writing. What this means for you for DLT is that you come to us with a general overview of your project, your budget, and a list of your sites — again, the more rural, the more remote, the more economically distressed, the better. And then we are going to get you a grant writer who can translate all of these ideas into a competitive narrative that you can then submit to the USDA.

If you are writing a proposal yourself but you just want an extra set of eyes to make sure you have dotted all your i's and crossed all your t's, we also have a proposal editing service that is at 25% of that full cost of grant writing.

How Working with Grants Office Looks

Ashley Schultz:
What this all looks like, if you are interested in exploring support, the first step would be to contact us at grantwriting@grantsoffice.com. You will want to come to that email having already read and worked through that workbook that Amber mentioned. You do not have to have full sentences or beautiful prose in all of the prompts, but what we do ask is that you have given each component of your project some thought, right? What sites are going to be included? What do you need to purchase for those sites? What is it all going to cost — those types of things.

From there, you will meet with Amber or another member of our team to discuss your project goals and your development needs. If you contract with us for writing, we will get you connected to a writer who, again, will just start putting pen to paper on your behalf. We do try to give you at least two opportunities to review those drafts and provide feedback to make sure we really captured your organization's goals and your mission. As you work toward that deadline, we will give you all the application materials so that you can then upload them into the portal and click submit. So again, if this is something that you are interested in, please contact us at grantwriting@grantsoffice.com to get started.

Other Grants Office Services

Ashley Schultz:
If you followed along with today's event and you just think DLT is not for you, that is okay too. I want to call your attention to some other Grants Office services that are available. We have a research and consultation service that allows you to sit down with a consultant like Amber to talk about your upcoming projects. And if DLT is not a good fit, we can find other state, federal, and foundation grants that could support you and your initiatives.

We also have project building services that allow you again to sit down with the consultant and build out a competitive application to an entirely different grant program. And we also have our subscription

service, Grants Office Communities, which gives you access to our database of 26,000 state, federal, and foundation grants so that you can do the research and the project building all on your own inside of that platform. Communities always has a free two-week trial, so if you have not gone over to check it out yet, I highly encourage you to do so.

Q&A Session

Ashley Schultz:
With that, I want to move things over here to our question and answer. I have, Amber, quite a handful of questions for you. Again, folks, if you have more questions, bottom right-hand corner to add more.

Q1: Are mobile health units eligible?

Amber Walker:
The answer is yes. Mobile health units are a particular case — they are not having a fixed location on their own, so they will be called a non-fixed end user, meaning that the hub address will be used to determine rurality point consideration. What that means is that if you have only urban hubs, a mobile health unit will not be eligible and your project will not be eligible. But if you have rural hub sites, those can be used for your mobile health units and will be scored like any regular end user site for rurality's sake.

Ashley Schultz:
Thank you. That is definitely threading the needle on that type of thing. If you have more questions about that — the person who asked this in the chat — please do not hesitate to reach out and we can chat with you in more detail.

I also want to call out a question in the chat that was about the list of USDA state directors. Our fantastic Multimedia Coordinator, Kate, dropped a URL into the chat that gives you the full list of all USDA state directors. So if that is not a conversation that you have had just yet and you do not know who that person is, hop on over to that website and find your state, and you will be able to find your exact point of contact.

Q2: Are there any options beyond cash match? Would in-kind match or a waiver hurt our chances?

Amber Walker:
DLT strongly prefers cash match from non-federal sources. There are a lot of hoops and specifications for in-kind match written out in the documents for application guidance. So yes, there are those options, but it is like a yes-but. The most competitive and preferred applications are going to have a cash match.

Ashley Schultz:
So technically allowed, but if you can find the cash somewhere, it might give you a bit of a leg up.

Amber Walker:
Yes. With such a well-known and competitive grant program, it is going to be easy for the USDA reviewers to really prioritize those cash match applications.

Ashley Schultz:
Having had the pleasure of being the moderator on the DLT education webinar from yesterday, I will say this came up yesterday as well. Some of the hub sites were bringing up a note that you can definitely leverage your end user sites to help you meet that cash match. So if you are here representing a hub, do not feel like you cannot ask those rural end sites to chip in a little bit on that cash component. It does not have to be — you are all coming in here as a team — it does not need to be a singular entity that is covering that match. Just make sure you keep your records straight.

Q3: Can the grant cover hands-on equipment at the end site — for example, simulators, mannequins, or a virtual dissection table?

Amber Walker:
This is going to be another one of those yes-but-and answers, as I hope is helpful. I talked earlier about how the USDA does not have blanket eligibility or blanket ineligibility when it comes to allowable technology. Now, mannequins, simulations, virtual dissection tables — I think I heard — those are going to be healthcare-specific but leaning more toward that training and education opportunity.

So it may be an allowable expense as part of your overall project, but you are going to have to have justification on those technologies. If you are capable and able to have an education component as part of your DLT project, where you are training healthcare professionals, that could be an allowable project cost. But it really comes down to how you are designing your project and how you are justifying those expenses. We have seen virtual reality nurse training, simulations, and mannequins be covered as expenses under the DLT umbrella, but then it comes down to maybe leaning, straddling the line of education versus that real-time healthcare service delivery.

Closing

Ashley Schultz:
Perfect. Thank you very much, Amber, and thanks to all of you for joining us here today. We hope that you found this to be a valuable use of your time. If you are applying to the Distance Learning and Telemedicine grant, we wish you all the best of luck. Feel free to reach out to us if you have any questions along the way or if you would like any assistance on your application. Otherwise, we wish you all a really great day.

— End of Transcript —

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