



# Boone County Commission

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – August 14, 2020

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## CARES ACT: FUNDING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Earlier this year, Congress put together funding packages designed to help local government, healthcare providers, schools, businesses, and communities through the challenges caused by COVID-19. At that time, the Boone County Commission began to design a process for the distribution of funding that would be allocated for our County. The County Commission did not seek this role but felt obligated to participate in the federally-funded program that, along with other funding features, would provide great relief to the citizens of the county in this time of job loss, business closures, school stress, and other challenges that are both financially harmful and stressful to almost everyone.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, and especially over the last two months, the perceived needs of the County have changed. Some expected that by now we would be in the rebuilding stage and that the virus would be behind us. Unfortunately, that is not the case and we are currently in the most intense period of containing the spread that we have yet seen. We will likely remain in this posture for an uncertain length of time. Although the problems are difficult and the timing of everything has become impossible to predict, we believe in Boone County and we are determined to make it through this unprecedented time.

Given the massive amount of dollars involved, we initially expected that the guidance provided by the federal government and then the state government would be substantial. However, during every conference/Zoom/virtual meeting/call with federal and state officials, we were told that the only certainty about the CARES Act was that, in 2021, auditors would be coming to local jurisdictions to ensure that funding decisions had been made appropriately, in accordance with the CARES Act. And, under the CARES Act, if the auditors were to determine that funding decisions had NOT been made appropriately, the federal government would require that the local jurisdiction, in our case the Boone County Commission (and thus the people of Boone County), repay the funds to the federal government.

With that in mind, the Boone County Commission has taken very seriously its obligation not only to distribute the funding, but to distribute it appropriately in accordance with CARES Act guidelines. The Commission began by reaching out to a company that had already established a track record for developing an online portal that would allow entities to submit applications for funding. With input and direction from Presiding Commissioner Atwill and Commissioner Thompson, the fillable form requires information from applicants, including the applicant's purpose and history; financial background, including ability to track funding; proposed use of CARES Act funding; methodology for demonstrating how the proposed use will impact the target population; whether there will be an ongoing need for the proposed activity "post-COVID-19," and, specifically for purposes of the CARES Act, how the project is related to or driven by COVID-19. It is anticipated that the portal will be open to accept applications by August 31, 2020.

In the meantime, the Boone County Commission has acted, in advance of opening the online portal, on proposals that are time-sensitive in nature. The first was a request from the City/County Health Department for funding to enable them to increase the level of contact tracing, testing, and disease investigation for our entire county. This request, clearly related to COVID-19 and thus eligible for funding under the CARES Act, was approved quickly and the Health Department has already mobilized more contact tracers. The sooner those who have either tested positive for COVID-19 or have been exposed to the virus can be identified, the sooner we can take steps to stop the spread of infection to others.

The second request came from the superintendents of all the school districts in the county. Since March of this year, the school districts have had to balance concerns of the safety of holding classes in person and concerns about whether all students have an equal opportunity to learn if learning goes "virtual." The latter concern hinged, in large part, upon whether a household has access to adequate internet service. For some residents in Boone County, adequacy of internet service isn't an issue. But for others, far too many others, adequate internet service seems to be unattainable. In other times and spaces, the availability of reliable internet service might have seemed more of a luxury than a necessity. Now, with learning, health care, and employment often entirely dependent upon that service, internet is the 21<sup>st</sup> century functional equivalent of that game-changer of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—electricity.

All superintendents in Boone County are aware that, even if they plan to hold school in the traditional classroom settings, it is highly likely that at some point, learning will move to a virtual format. If and when that happens, they are aware that students without adequate internet access will not have the same learning opportunities as students with that access. The superintendents therefore requested funding for 1,345 hotspots, at a cost of \$240 per hotspot (which includes one year of service), for distribution throughout the county's school districts. While, in a perfect world, solutions that provide better service might exist, this solution can begin to rectify disparities that have existed in our community far too long.

As with the request by the Health Department, this project is clearly within the scope of the CARES Act. Prior to COVID-19, the schools had not had the need for any long-term model for remote learning; therefore, internet access was not a determining factor for educational success. In our present COVID-19 world, that is not the case. Further, because the decision to go virtual could happen at any time in the school year, even within the first couple of weeks, it was imperative that the hotspots be available now, not weeks or months from now. Thus, on August 10, 2020, the decision was made to purchase the 1,345 hotspots, which will be distributed throughout Boone County.

Currently, the Boone County Commission is actively reviewing all time-sensitive requests for CARES Act funding and, as the portal opens, will review all other requests submitted for consideration. We know that the needs are great and, undoubtedly, the requests will exceed the dollars allocated to us under the CARES Act. We will utilize the portal to allocate the money so as to meet the greatest needs in a manner that is both transparent and accountable. We recognize that every part of Boone County has been impacted by COVID-19 and we understand the magnitude of our obligation to ensure that the CARES Act funding is distributed equitably and appropriately throughout the county.

We have no idea whether or not there will be additional funding or what rules would apply if more money were to become available. We welcome your questions and advice as we navigate these uncharted times. We request your assistance in taking personal responsibility to keep socially distant, to wear a mask and to take all reasonable precautions to hold down the spread of COVID-19. We cannot have a vital economy, a successful school system, or a bright future without a healthy population.

Daniel K. Atwill, Presiding Commissioner  
Fred J. Parry, District I Commissioner  
Janet M. Thompson, District II Commissioner

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