

The Benefits of Fiber For Two Rural Communities

Survey: FTTH helps rural residents work from home, access health care, pursue education and age in place.

The Minnesota Border-to-Border Broadband program, now in its third year, provides state grants to help build broadband networks in unserved and underserved areas. Consolidated Telecommunications Company (CTC), a cooperative telephone company based in Brainerd, Minnesota, has received several grant awards from the program and used them to continue its buildout of fiber to the home.

In a newsletter to its members, CTC explained why the fiber build is necessary and why grants are critical to delivering fiber in remote areas: “In today’s regulatory environment, one cannot be competitive in the market without funding through grants and government assistance to help expand services to rural areas. The return on investment would never support fiber builds to homes in these low populated regions; however, CTC is willing to take on this risk in an effort to help bring much needed services to those in our area. We know that people need fiber in order to be ready for all the advancements in technology we can expect in the near future.”

In 2016, CTC hired Vantage Point Solutions to survey customers whose connections had been upgraded to fiber in two communities covered by the first Border-to-Border grant. More than one-quarter of the customers in these communities completed the survey. The full survey report is available at goo.gl/Z7GFDQ.

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

Highlights of the survey findings are as follows:

- About 40 percent of respondents said their household internet connections were needed for schoolwork by either K–12 students or postsecondary students.
- Nearly a third (30 percent) utilized their home internet connections for health care services or to interact with health care providers.
- About one-quarter of households used their internet connections for job-seeking activities.
- More than half (56 percent) used their home internet connections for work. Of those that did, almost 37 percent used it daily. About 14 percent of respondents were in formal telework programs (employer-approved work from home on a regular basis) either full time or part time, and approximately the same number said they could not telework without a reliable internet connection.
- One in five respondents had a home-based business, of which one-quarter were farms. One in seven respondents said they could not have a home-based business without a reliable internet connection, and nearly a third of business owners stated that a reliable, high-speed internet connection was very important to their home-based business or farm. Thirty-six percent reported that having a reliable, high-speed internet connection reduced the operating costs of their home-based business or farm. Broadband access helped business owners reduce costs because it
 - Enabled them to get work done faster
 - Made it easier to order parts and products
 - Helped them respond to customers quickly
 - Avoided the cost of traveling to seminars, conferences and meetings
 - Enabled them to ship items from home
 - Was less expensive and more reliable than cellular or satellite connections
 - Made finding information easier.
- Almost 9 percent of respondents said they planned to start a home-based business in the next three years.
- Fewer than 2 percent of older adults said they did not use the internet; more than two-thirds of older adults surfed and shopped on the web, conducted online banking activities and utilized social media. Because access to and adoption of technology is one factor that helps older adults age in place, the new network seems likely to positively impact aging in place.
- Two-thirds of customers stated that the internet was very important for their families; almost 40 percent said they could not live in a home without it. ❖