

## Fiber Connect 2021: If It's Not Fiber, It's Not Broadband

The annual, in-person event highlighted what could be the beginning of the biggest broadband investment cycle in the nation's history bridging the gaping digital divide.

By Deborah Kish / *Fiber Broadband Association*

**F**iber Connect, a premier fiber broadband industry event, occurred in Nashville from July 25 to 28. It attracted key decision-makers from all spectrums of the fiber broadband ecosystem and was sold out long before it began. It started with two opening speakers: Gary Bolton, president and CEO of the Fiber Broadband Association (FBA), and U.S. Senator Marsha Blackburn (R-TN). Leading telco industry CEOs and executives, including Hu Meena, CEO of C Spire; Tony Thomas, CEO of Windstream; and David Pistacchio of DigitalBridge, a private equity company, delivered keynotes.

The event was a tremendous success and marked the beginning of the largest broadband investment cycle in U.S. history.



### PRE-CONFERENCE: THE WORKSHOPS

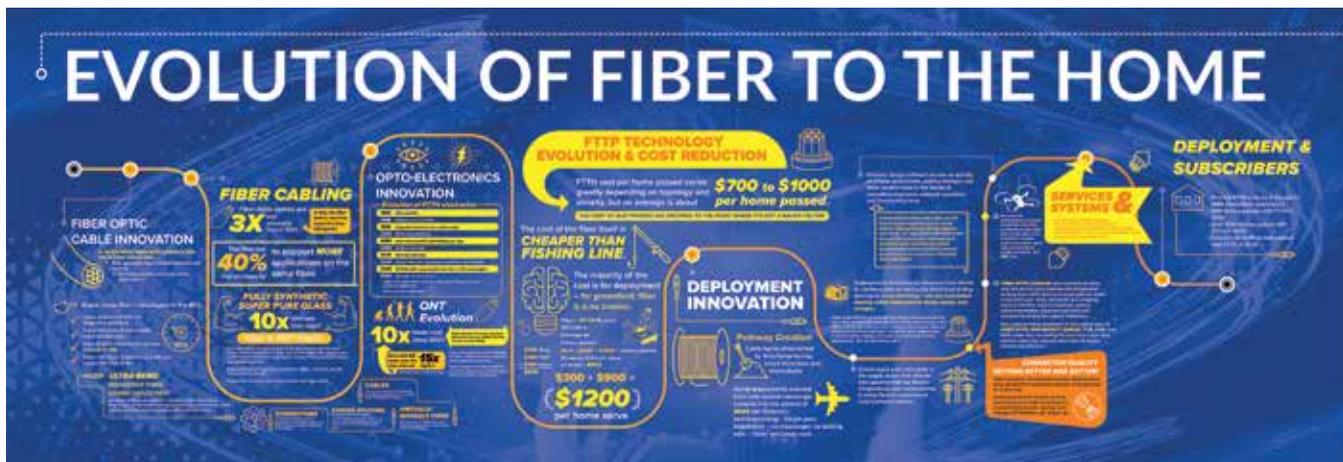
All sessions were standing room only and hosted and presented by leading industry vendors and service providers. The Fiber Broadband Starter Kit Workshop series provided information to attendees thinking about deploying a fiber network or starting to build one. Because there are many aspects to installing a fiber network, the series took a soup-to-nuts approach, demystifying the basics of bringing fiber broadband to a community and ensuring the success

of the deployment. Topics covered the basics of fiber to the home and network design and extended to more detailed discussions about how to plan, design and engineer a fiber deployment and lessons learned from network operators.

Though deploying fiber is a multifaceted process from a planning and construction standpoint, building community and political will is also a critical part of the puzzle. Attendees in the process of building fiber networks to communities were eager to learn about how to gain support from the communities and obtain government funding for such initiatives in light of the \$65 billion allocated for broadband in the new infrastructure bill.

The Customer Branding Workshop was designed to recognize major changes happening in the industry for service providers striving to meet customer expectations and comply with regulators. The takeaway: Service providers need to update branding and customer strategies, including for product design, digital and social media marketing for new products, and time-to-market.

In addition, Broadband Forum hosted its first face-to-face BAsE workshop in 2021 at Fiber Connect, which focused on the future of fiber technologies – the business drivers and use cases. As technology improves, service providers



need to understand what to take into consideration when building a future-proof service delivery network using 10 gigabit XGS-PON to 25 gigabit and 50 gigabit PON to the next generation of Super PONs. This session was followed by a panel session that included a Q&A with attendees.

### FIBER BECOMES CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The COVID-19 pandemic made broadband a need, not a want. But not just broadband – *high-speed* broadband. The antiquated FCC definition of 25/3 Mbps is no longer acceptable. Opening speaker Marsha Blackburn emphasized this point, calling out fiber as the critical infrastructure that will provide consumers and businesses with the necessary speeds to conduct even the most basic daily tasks.

With the number of connected devices in a single household growing, and every person in the household fighting for the same pipe, Americans are screaming for a better experience. But it's more than just the ability to stream TV shows, play games or even complete work or homework. Broadband is vital to provide health care via telemedicine to people who may not be able to visit a health care facility in person. During the "Future of Healthcare" session, Dr. Yaa Kumah-Crystal, clinical director of HealthIT at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center, said that remote monitoring is

just around the corner and will require "adequate broadband connectivity" equating to 100 Mbps symmetrical.

### WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The FBA has launched an initiative to help accelerate fiber deployments and keep up with demand. The Optical Telecom Installation Certification (OpTIC) course will be offered at vocational schools, community colleges and veterans' programs around the country.

On July 27, the FBA officially signed an agreement with the U.S. Department of Labor registering the apprenticeship. Graduates of the classroom portion may have an opportunity for on-the-job training with local service providers or contractors. The program will launch in beta form with the first pilot at Wilson Community College in North Carolina.



### 20 YEARS OF INNOVATION

The FBA celebrated its 20th anniversary with the Fiber Innovation Zone, which showcased all innovations of the past two decades, from concept to cost to deployment strategies and success. The Fiber Innovation Zone supported the overall theme of the conference by exemplifying the important role fiber has played throughout the years – and will continue to play for years to come. Fiber has been compared to the electrification of the U.S. in the 1930s and 1940s, when electricity was brought to rural areas and supplied farms with an important utility.

A YouTube video (<https://bit.ly/3g6nGAH>) recaps the event nicely. Service providers or contractors looking for OpTICs-certified technicians, community or technical colleges, or veterans' programs interested in offering the certification program may email me at [dkish@fiberbroadband.org](mailto:dkish@fiberbroadband.org). For information on participating in Fiber Connect 2022 in Nashville, email [lgreen@fiberbroadband.org](mailto:lgreen@fiberbroadband.org). ❖



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