

# FIBER CONNECT 2023: Addressing New Research, Resources and Workforce Challenges

The conference highlighted the prominence of fiber, fresh training opportunities, new tools for planning fiber networks and more.

By Deborah Kish / *Fiber Broadband Association*

**A**t this year's Fiber Connect 2023 conference in Orlando, Florida, the Fiber Broadband Association (FBA) brought together 4,000 attendees from all across the fiber broadband ecosystem. The show featured 275 speakers discussing topics that included workforce development; Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program funding and related policies; what fiber will disrupt next and more.

The FBA made several announcements during the show, including the results of its annual survey conducted in partnership with RVA LLC Market Research & Consulting (RVA). The FBA's annual consumer research report, "The Status of U.S. Broadband: The Growing Preference to Fiber Broadband," shows that fiber broadband is considered the best internet service delivery method in terms of speed and reliability among 63 percent of all U.S. consumers, including 54 percent of cable users.

The National Telecommunications and Information Association's (NTIA) BEAD Program prioritizes fiber projects because of fiber's ability to replace aging copper and coax wiring and provide vital, scalable telecommunications infrastructure for generations to come. The FBA study aims to demonstrate customers' preferences as well. When respondents were asked what type of internet service was best in terms of speed and reliability, fiber broadband scored 2.5 times higher than cable. The FBA expects nearly as much fiber will be deployed during the next five years as has been deployed throughout history.

The full results of the study reveal that high-speed broadband is necessary for all communities to successfully participate in today's society. Each year the FBA conducts the survey, it learns that the preference for fiber broadband is growing. Meanwhile, Fiber Connect doubled in attendance over the past two years, and the FBA projects even more growth at its 2024 conference in Nashville, Tennessee.

## OPTIC PATH MINI COURSE

Though the 2023 conference focused largely on BEAD funding and the new networks being planned across the nation, it also addressed the challenges stakeholders face. Workforce development was a significant theme that speakers and panelists described as an ongoing threat to broadband deployment. General sessions and breakout panels focused on boosting fiber technician recruitment, which is a key FBA goal. This is why the FBA announced the launch of the OpTIC Path Mini Course at Fiber Connect 2023.

"Broadband Basics: Your Future in Fiber!" is a free, 15-minute course that introduces fiber broadband concepts and potential career opportunities. The FBA's goal is to attract new students and help close the skilled-labor gap.

During the conference, the FBA zeroed in on the challenges and opportunities for workforce development in the industry. The Workforce Development track covered launching a training program, growing the labor pool, bringing new people to the industry, and looking outside traditional talent. Too often students at middle and high schools are targeted, but other groups of individuals are overlooked, including marginalized groups that could be valuable and significantly impact the gap in the workforce. Expanding exposure to these individuals will provide career building opportunities, allow for a consistently filled pipeline, and potentially increase the number of instructors.

## AWARDING ACHIEVEMENT, SUPPORTING MEMBERS

Each year, the FBA recognizes companies and individuals for their achievements and dedication to the fiber industry. To expand on FBA's workforce development efforts, last year it created the Gene Scott Education Award. This year's recipient, S&N Communications, contributed greatly to the OpTIC Path program. The company leveraged its practical experience

employing fiber optic technicians to develop a new module for the OpTIC Path course “Documentation, Values, and Success in the Field.”

The module distinguishes the FBA program from other fiber optic training courses by highlighting actions to help make technicians successful in the field, including a focus on safety, craftsmanship, documentation and customer service.

FBA made a few other announcements at the show to further support members as they begin planning and developing new broadband networks. First, it announced the availability of new geospatial planning tools. Through Broadbandtoolkit.com, members can access Fiber Finder, a tool that indicates populated and unpopulated areas with the number of locations and units through hexagons. The National Hex Toolkit, which helps with BEAD

planning, provides more granularity identifying areas with the highest quality of coverage by technology, speeds and much more using the FCC’s Broadband Data Collection program. The Fiber Strategy Toolkit, the most strategic, helps identify opportunities to build in areas that currently do not have fiber across all 50 states and six territories.

Finally, the Broadband Infrastructure Playbook version 3.0 was released to address the Extremely High

Cost per Location Threshold (EHCT) concept and what it means for BEAD funding. Version 3.0 explains how an EHCT is set, the consequences of setting it too low or too high, topics to consider when setting an EHCT, and how to set a reasonable EHCT. 🙌

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Learn more about these announcements and more at [www.fiberbroadband.org](http://www.fiberbroadband.org).



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