

Kentucky's 'Gigabit Hollers'

PRTC's full fiber buildout offers new hope to an impoverished region of Kentucky.

By Masha Zager / *Broadband Communities*



Keith Gabbard, CEO of Peoples Rural Telephone Cooperative, at the event celebrating the launch of gigabit service

Peoples Rural Telephone Cooperative (PRTC) has served Jackson County and Owsley County in Appalachian Kentucky since 1950. The two counties together have a population of about 18,000, and the biggest town has 900 people. In terms of income, these counties are in the bottom percentile of all U.S. counties, and unemployment rates are high. "It's a beautiful place, and it has wonderful people," says CEO Keith Gabbard. "My mission is to make it a better place to live."

Gabbard has pursued that mission by building out fiber to the home throughout PRTC's entire service area, beginning in

2008. In addition to investing its own funds, PRTC made use of Rural Utilities Service funding, including a \$17.5 million grant through the broadband stimulus program. "The ARRA program and the grant money really helped," Gabbard says. "They made it possible."

Money wasn't the only challenge. To pull fiber cable through rough terrain where vehicles could not easily travel, contractors had to rely on mules, following an old Kentucky tradition.

In 2015, the buildout was completed. Fiber now passes every home and business in the service area – even the most remote – and about 60 percent of co-op members are connected to fiber broadband services. However, finishing construction is only the beginning of the larger project of using the network for the betterment of Jackson and Owsley counties. Despite having been brought up, as Gabbard puts it, "not to brag on yourself," he is now busy letting the world know what PRTC has done.



Keith Gabbard will speak about broadband and economic development at the **2016 BROADBAND COMMUNITIES SUMMIT**, April 5–7 in Austin.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

PRTC applied for two certifications from NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association and was officially designated a Smart Rural Community and Gig-Capable Provider. It then plastered “Smart Rural Community/Gig-Capable Network” signs at the sides of roads throughout the service area. It held an event to celebrate the launch of its gigabit Internet service. In addition, PRTC works with local elected officials and with the local electric co-op, which has an economic development officer, to help publicize the network.

All this “bragging on itself” is paying off. PRTC’s network captured the attention of the Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program (EKCEP), whose Teleworks USA program trains rural workers for work-from-home employment opportunities and then helps place them, thus allowing them to participate in the global economy without relocating. In other parts of rural Kentucky, Teleworks trainees often had difficulty finding work because they did not have access to the fast, reliable broadband employers required. So when EKCEP learned about PRTC’s network, it decided to launch a major training initiative there.

Teleworks obtained a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission, and PRTC helped get community buy-in to give the organization access to a training space and a fiber connection on favorable terms. In less than a year, Teleworks placed more than 100 trainees in jobs, adding \$2 million to the local economy. “That’s phenomenal,” Gabbard says. “It’s a real success story for the county. People rave about it.”

In addition to the Teleworks jobs, people have found remote or home-based jobs independently, and there is even one reverse commute: A PRTC staffer married a woman from Chattanooga, moved there to be with her, and kept his job. Gigabit connections at both ends made this arrangement possible. A call center is getting ready to expand its operations in the area. “Hopefully, our broadband helped in that, too,” Gabbard says.



Construction crews used Kentucky mules to pull fiber cable through rough terrain.

BROADBAND ADOPTION

Because poverty and lack of digital literacy still keep many residents from using the Internet, PRTC makes an effort to overcome the digital divide and get residents online. It partners with schools and libraries to run training programs and with banks to offer low-interest loans for purchasing computers. It offers discounted broadband for new users and free broadband to the public library.

Sometimes broadband adoption gets a boost from an unexpected source. “In Kentucky, most people are crazy about University of Kentucky basketball,” Gabbard says. “It’s the one thing everyone agrees on. Well, there was a game the other night that you could only watch online. It was amazing how many people decided they had to learn how to use the Internet!”

The Owsley County school system used PRTC’s broadband to solve an old problem in a new way. Many students live in the mountains, where roads are impassable on snowy days. Schools used to shut down so often that the school year lasted well into the summer. Once most teachers and students had reliable broadband at home, the superintendent received permission from the state government to let them work from home

10 days per year. Teachers send out assignments, students complete them and the teachers review them, all online.

BEYOND THE BORDERS

Gabbard is now looking for ways to expand service outside PRTC’s traditional service area. PRTC has already built fiber a few miles outside its territory to serve an electric co-op and plans to connect some wireless towers as well. “Without Universal Service Fund support, we have to be more strategic,” he explains. “We need to at least break even.” He hopes to provide some laterals from the new Kentucky Wired statewide middle-mile network to anchor institutions.

When Lisa Mensah, undersecretary of USDA Rural Development, visited PRTC recently, she asked Gabbard whether he had been nervous about incurring so much debt (most of it lent by her agency) to build the FTTH network. “Why did you do it?” she asked.

Gabbard said, “I would like our area to be a place where kids don’t have to leave home.” ❖

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