

Neighbors Helping Neighbors: Expanding Broadband in Wyoming

Visionary Broadband sets an ambitious mission to make internet connectivity available to everyone in the Cowboy State.

By Ashley Pino / *Connected Nation*

Have you ever referred to someone you don't live near as your neighbor? You probably have if you grew up in a small, rural town. In that kind of tightly knit community, the owner of the shop down the street, the local librarian, or even residents in a city several hours away are your neighbors. This is precisely how those living in Wyoming feel. They have genuine care and concern for each other and want what's best for their fellow Cowboy State residents.

Brothers Brian and Greg Worthen share that sentiment. They are the managing partners of Visionary Broadband, which focuses on providing quality internet service by customizing products for underserved and rural markets, with a recent emphasis on fiber technology.

The company was founded 27 years ago in a small, blue house by three friends who merely wanted internet access. Once they figured out how to get themselves connected, they began getting requests to help others get access as well. Friends and family began paying the group \$20 a month – most of which was placed in a dresser drawer for a later date. In 1994, the friends had no idea where their business would lead; they just wanted to get on the internet like everyone else. Twenty-seven years later, Visionary Broadband employs around 160 people.

The idea that the internet could and should be available to anyone was the reason Visionary Broadband came to be. Individual success was a

motivator, but the group had a bigger purpose – to connect Wyoming.

The organization began with dial-up, quickly moved through wireless, DSL and T1, and now provides fiber internet in a three-state plus region. The company continues to grow – helping more than 20,000 customers get connected – but its vision for Wyoming success doesn't stop there.

STRUGGLING TO CONNECT

Stasi Shippy is a wife and mother who lives on a ranch with her family. At the beginning of 2020, any internet access was miles away. “During the pandemic, my daughter needed access to her school, and without internet access, we were stuck,” she said. “Our only option was to drive into town (40 minutes away) each day so that she could do her schoolwork.”

Shippy added, “It was never a financial issue – we could pay for internet, but there were no towers near us. My husband is an engineer and couldn't even download a drawing he needed for work at home. Working from home was not a reliable option for him.”

On December 17, 2020, things changed for the Shippy family – that's the date they finally got connected. Thanks to funding through Wyoming Business Council's ConnectWY Program and the CARES Act Fund, Visionary Broadband built a tower near the family's ranch. Shippy says the tower has helped roughly 15

families in her area. “The benefits of being able to work from home, access telehealth, complete schoolwork, or even stream a show on Netflix have been wonderful.”

When Greg Worthen was asked how funding has helped expand broadband throughout the state, his answer was simple: It fills in the nooks and crannies.

“Up until now, it wasn’t a good business decision to install a tower that would only provide access to a few families,” said Worthen, who serves as the special project engineering and business development managing partner for Visionary Broadband. “The cost was great, and return on investment was small.”

“The other issue was finding the staff needed to complete these projects,” he added. “It required a lot of workforces. The funding has given us the ability to reach areas of Wyoming we never could before and provide numerous jobs to our community.”



SERVING NEIGHBORS

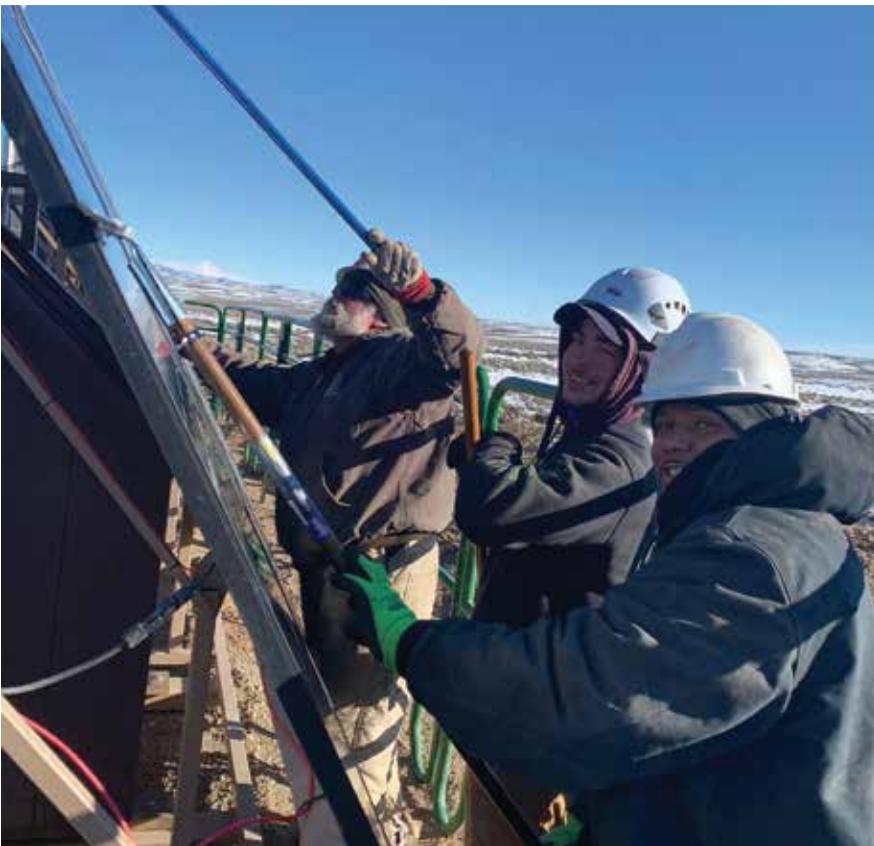
Wyoming is a large state, ranking ninth in square miles in the U.S. However, it is also very widely dispersed – the entire state has only two Target stores, for example. Residents are so spread out

that a tower may grant access to only a few families, making selecting the best locations challenging.

How does Visionary Broadband decide where the towers go? Experience. “We know Wyoming – we have been providing broadband to this state long enough to know the areas that are currently unserved,” said Worthen. “We have friends and family in other communities who are asking us to bring broadband to their area.”

The Wyoming State Broadband Program, Visionary Broadband and residents from the Cowboy State all have one thing in common – they want to help their Wyoming neighbors. They are proud of where they come from and enjoy the best for the great state. The past few years have shown that Wyoming still has some work to do to help its residents live their best lives.

Worthen said that at the beginning of the pandemic, when schools were shut down and everyone was learning from home, he got a call from a superintendent of a local school district that was not a Visionary Broadband client. The district was caught in a challenging situation: its internet stopped working, and the more prominent provider it was under contract with was no help. The superintendent called Worthen over a weekend asking what he could do – school was starting on Monday, and his staff needed to teach remotely.



Funding has made it possible to find enough workers to build out broadband infrastructure.

COMMUNITY BROADBAND

Visionary Broadband has used funding from the Wyoming Business Council's ConnectWY Program and the CARES Act Fund to expand broadband throughout the state.

Worthen and his team stepped up to help. Visionary Broadband fixed the problem, which allowed the school to continue educating its students.

Why? Visionary did it for its Wyoming neighbors.

BIG GOALS, MORE RESOURCES

Getting a school connected during the pandemic is just one of the many success stories from a state that prides itself on moving its residents into the future. As more and more people relocate to the Cowboy State

and remote work becomes the norm, Wyoming residents must have the access they need.

The Wyoming State Broadband Program urges residents to visit www.wyobbmap.org to take a speed test and student connectivity survey. The data will help the Wyoming State Broadband Program identify underserved areas and allow providers, including Visionary Broadband, to address areas lacking adequate internet.

Visionary Broadband hopes to "give the best possible experience to the end

user, an experience that starts with having adequate broadband access," said Worthen.

Wyoming has set big goals, and for the first time, resources are available to achieve these goals. As a Wyoming-based provider, Visionary Broadband provides the perfect glimpse into how the state is facing connectivity challenges for all. After all, it's about being a good neighbor. ❖



Ashley Pino is the marketing communications specialist for Connected Nation. This article was written on behalf of the Wyoming State Broadband

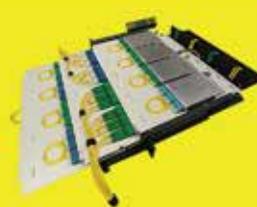
Program (wyobbmap.org). Learn more about Visionary Broadband at vnc.com.

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