

# A Summit for Rural Prosperity

The NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association SRC Live! summit offered new insights about the ways rural providers are enabling a host of new broadband applications.

By Shirley Bloomfield / NTCA

**T**his June, more than 200 rural broadband providers, community advocates and experts across rural sectors – ranging from ag-tech to health care to education and more – gathered in Las Vegas for SRC Live!

The Smart Rural Community (SRC) program, run by NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association, has grown over the years from an awards program for NTCA members who achieve specific broadband benchmarks to an interactive program and brand involving everyone with an interest in connecting rural America with high-quality broadband services. SRC is unique because it focuses not only on the broadband component, which is essential (SRC providers must offer speeds of at least 100 Mbps), but also on how broadband changes lives.

SRC promotes collaboration among rural ISPs and local leaders to leverage broadband for precision agriculture, economic development, education, health care, and other vital services. From its inception, SRC has been about more than the network. It is about the power of those networks and rural leadership to be a force for change in rural spaces.

With billions of dollars in infrastructure funding flowing to states in the next few years, now is the perfect time to bring together those who want to see rural America thrive. It will take a village – or a community – to bridge the digital divide, and Smart Rural Communities are at the forefront of doing so.

## REACHING MORE PEOPLE

“This isn’t just us anymore.” That is what one SRC provider said as the meeting concluded –

and it’s true. As we pulled together the summit, we did not want it to be like any other NTCA conference. We invited folks from all sectors and encouraged SRC providers to “bring a buddy” – someone from their community they thought would benefit from the discussions. By the end of the two days, we were clearly on to something. This movement is not just about providers anymore. It is about ensuring the right people are at the table to help communities succeed.

I was thrilled to kick off these critical conversations with a panel of key partners. Angie Cooper, chief program officer of the Heartland Forward Foundation, told the crowd, “Broadband access impacts everything in the community.” I couldn’t have said it better myself! We also heard from Jake Varn with The Pew Charitable Trusts and Taylre Beaty, broadband director for the state of Tennessee. She helpfully reminded providers, “Now is the time to tell your story because if you don’t, someone else will.”

We heard from Alan Morgan, chief executive officer of the National Rural Health Association; Allen Pratt, executive director of the National Rural Education Association; and Kelly Wismer, chief of staff for the Appalachian Regional Commission. All three play an important role in delivering critical services to rural communities – and all those services are enhanced when quality broadband is involved.

Morgan said, “There is no path forward for rural health without broadband access.” The word *health* in that sentence could substitute for many different words, and it would still hold.

## THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

The people and companies who will succeed in the broadband industry over the next few years will be those who can think big. And I don't mean *big* as in the big guys who dominated over the last several decades but left rural spaces behind. I mean even the little guys, who can make the most of this broadband moment and get creative about how to do so. If any NTCA members needed proof that anything was possible, all they needed to do was listen to the stories in the room at SRC Live!

Ben Lomand Connect in Tennessee connected public spaces in the community, such as downtown and state parks. GRM Networks in Missouri took fiber to parts of Iowa because it saw a need. CTC Connect in Minnesota went beyond broadband, supporting Habitat for Humanity and mental health in its community and helping to build a student center. Gila River in Arizona has

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a whole center at its company devoted to digital inclusion. These are just some of the ways SRC providers have gone above and beyond to support the needs of their communities. After SRC Live!, I am confident that we will add many more stories to this list.

To bridge the digital divide and help rural America succeed will require all hands on deck. SRC providers will play a hugely important role, but if we learned anything from SRC Live!, it's that partners are critical too. To see the entire network of SRC

providers and learn more about the value of living in and partnering with a Smart Rural Community, visit [www.smartrruralcommunity.org](http://www.smartrruralcommunity.org). ❖

*Shirley Bloomfield  
is the CEO of  
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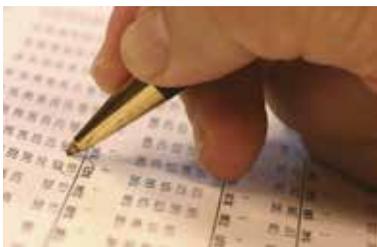
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