

## The Road to Apprenticeship Is Paved With Fiber

The need for fiber technician training comes at a time when new broadband projects in local communities can access government funding for infrastructure builds.

By Deborah Kish / *Fiber Broadband Association*

The U.S. is entering a time in which the most significant investment in broadband is coming to fruition, and there will be a great need for skilled workers. As the Fiber Broadband Association (FBA) Fiber Optic Technician course (OpTIC) rolls out across the country, the 2,000-hour national registered apprenticeship it created through the U.S. Department of Labor should be considered. The benefits of onboarding

with advanced, entry-level work as an apprentice are vast for both employer and apprentice.

An expected 60.8 million homes will be connected to reliable, high-speed fiber internet access in rural U.S. and tribal communities over the next five years. That means internet service providers (ISPs) will need people who can do installations. Unfortunately, a shortage of skilled fiber optic technicians will delay

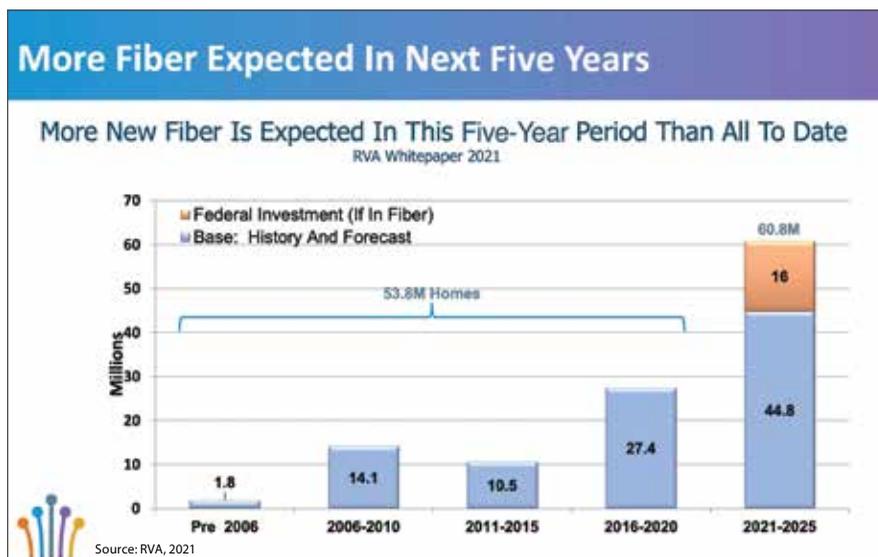
broadband projects connecting millions of Americans to the internet's critical infrastructure.

Enormous job opportunities based on fiber broadband exist for anyone looking to learn a new trade and start a promising, long-term career. The FBA OpTIC course with the registered apprenticeship provides a fast track to filling much-needed positions on an ongoing basis and long-term career-building opportunities for workers.

### NEW APPRENTICESHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Supporting workforce development and apprenticeship programs, the Department of Labor's Good Jobs Initiative proposes states will have the opportunity to fund pre-apprenticeship initiatives run by local community and educational partners that work with registered apprenticeship programs. In addition, the programs could provide compensation subsidies, or funds could be used for job-related training programs. It is suggested that every \$100 million of funding will yield an estimated 25,000 workers for registered apprenticeship programs.

Other estimates, such as from a recent Brookings Institution study, project that an \$80 billion investment





would create 200,000 job years in about 130 occupations in broadband, with 31.5 percent in installation, maintenance and repair and 11.1 percent in construction and extraction.

#### TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS

Employers must keep their pipelines fed, reduce recruitment costs, and increase productivity.

As with most trade occupations, there will always be a certain level of on-the-job training (OJT) in which employers teach new employees the processes, equipment and methodology developed to ensure a business's success and keep projects on track. An apprenticeship provides just that but is designed with additional benefits outside of recruitment cost and turnover rate reduction and increased productivity, including providing a career path for new hires, "earn while you learn" environments, and higher wage-earning potential. Furthermore, the apprenticeship path allows companies to consistently fill the pipeline of qualified workers as they learn from the experienced mentors nearing retirement.

#### BRIGHT FUTURE FOR FIBER OPTIC TECHNICIANS

The telecom industry has many opportunities in terms of occupations and careers. Still, a common

misperception about getting into the sector persists: A person must know a family member or a friend in the business. Interestingly, most people who begin their careers in telecom tend to stay for decades, regardless of how they got there, whether they stay in the position they started in or move on to another part of the business.

The career path for a fiber optic technician is limitless. A new technician starting in the field can advance to being an outside plant manager or crew leader. There's also the option to make a career change, pivoting to sales, product management, or marketing with the service provider or the vendor community. Other opportunities include research, consulting or becoming a mentor or instructor.

The fiber optic technician career path comes with the potential for high earnings. According to a recent compensation survey by the FBA for the position of Fiber Optic Technician, 28 percent of respondents indicated a starting salary of \$45–56K, and 26 percent stated a starting salary of \$66–76K. Of those who pay an hourly rate, the average hourly rate is between \$30 and \$45, with a couple on the high end at \$100–\$140 per hour.

Annual merit increases range from 3 percent to 5 percent, and only 1 percent of the respondents indicated that they do not offer full benefits (80

percent offer 401K). Apprenticeship programs promise gradual pay increases over one year.

The FBA OpTIC program is a National Registered Apprenticeship with the U.S. Department of Labor. The FBA launched the program with Wilson Community College in North Carolina as the first pilot along with Greenlight Community Broadband, the local, community-owned, fiber-to-the-home network. In addition, the FBA is working with other community colleges, state Departments of Labor and veterans programs across the nation to bring people back into the workforce, develop careers and get fiber to the home across the U.S. ❖

*For more information about FBA's program, visit [www.fiberbroadband.org/page/fba-optic-optical-telecom-installation-certification](http://www.fiberbroadband.org/page/fba-optic-optical-telecom-installation-certification) or contact Deborah Kish at [dkish@fiberbroadband.org](mailto:dkish@fiberbroadband.org).*

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