

How Do Government and Broadband Providers Connect the Nation?

Public-private partnerships are a powerful way to build broadband infrastructure and close the digital divide.

By Jonathan Spalter / *USTelecom*

Government and business leaders too often find themselves at cross purposes on major public initiatives. But one of the biggest success stories now unfurling takes the opposite tack – working together. From New England villages to rural Arkansas towns and beyond, broadband companies are locking arms with local and state leaders to bring their resources, expertise and connections to finish the job of connecting everyone in the U.S. to the power and opportunity of broadband.

These constructive, on-the-ground partnerships are steadily advancing the ball down the field as the nation strives to achieve high-speed connectivity for every U.S. home and business. The good news? This long-held aspiration is closer than ever to being achieved. According to the FCC, roughly 91 percent of rural Americans have access to broadband, and a majority of connected consumers now have speeds of 100 Mbps or more in their homes.

The recent federal infrastructure law commits \$65 billion to the connectivity cause. These resources join the roughly \$86 billion in private funds that U.S. broadband providers committed in 2021 alone to build out and continually enhance strong, resilient U.S. digital infrastructure.

The challenge? The closer the U.S. gets to 100 percent connectivity, the steeper the climb in reaching the final frontier, particularly rural areas where the economics of deployment are upside down because of sparse populations and lots of

miles between neighbors. The combination can be cost prohibitive for carriers to take on alone. That's why broadband providers are working with government partners to get the job done in communities across the country.

These alliances allow each party to play to its strengths. Government officials help direct funds to where they're most needed and clear deployment hurdles – from ensuring timely permitting to securing rights of way to conducting the physical builds. Broadband companies dig the trenches, lay the fiber and take responsibility for building and managing these complex networks for the long haul.

The alliance can expedite connections for local citizens and avert the costly project failures that too often occur when local governments choose to go it alone and build and manage their own broadband networks – costing local taxpayers millions and keeping connectivity out of reach.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

In sharp contrast, public-private partnerships are proving a formidable one-two punch in communities across the country.

Stuttgart, Arkansas, received \$6.1 million in federal funds last year, awarded through the Arkansas Rural Connect Broadband Grant Program, to help the city upgrade to an all-fiber network. The grant required Stuttgart to select a broadband provider to build the infrastructure. A half dozen companies pitched for the project,

and the city opted to go with Arkansas-based Ritter Communications, a trusted regional telecommunications provider since 1906.

Ritter committed \$2 million of company capital alongside the federal funds. Now, residents have 100 percent fiber connectivity through Ritter's RightFiber product, which includes internet, phone and video. The lightning-fast internet service starts at \$45 a month for 100 Mbps fiber internet. And, thanks to another crucial government partnership, the Affordable Connectivity Program, low-income families can knock an additional \$30 off their monthly bill. This helps ensure everyone has access to broadband and affordable pathways to using it. In addition to the grant-funded areas it is building in partnership with the state, Ritter is deploying \$300 million in private funds over three years to expand its network to underserved areas not eligible for grants.

Local providers across the country are making similar efforts to connect their communities. In New England, Consolidated Communications is hard at work bringing fiber to 1.6 million homes and businesses by 2025. Residents in communities throughout the region are selecting Consolidated as their broadband partner – turning to a company that's been a committed neighbor for 125 years.

Totelcom Communications is a family-owned company serving 6,000 customers across six small towns and counting in De Leon, Texas. There's not a major metropolitan area within 80 miles. The biggest employer is the local school district, and most folks work on family farms. Totelcom traces its roots to stringing telephone lines to connect these communities back in 1895.

Today, when economics forced the consolidation of two local health care facilities, Totelcom stepped up and laid 7 miles of fiber to connect the new location so community members had access to quality care without having to drive long distances, often in ill health, to receive it. They also host digital literacy classes to ensure seniors and others are comfortable using telehealth technology in their homes.



CRITERIA FOR SUCCESSFUL ALLIANCES

Local communities won't find more committed or qualified partners than local broadband providers. As they forge alliances to close their digital divide, several criteria are critical:

- **Prioritize unserved and underserved homes and businesses.** This is a requirement of new federal broadband funds – for good reason. It avoids costly duplication and keeps the focus on ensuring everyone has high-speed connectivity. The FCC is in the final stage of developing detailed, nationwide connectivity maps to ensure taxpayer funds are targeted with precision to unserved and underserved locations. Most of the new public funding will be distributed under this direction.
- **Insist on partners with proven expertise.** Past government efforts too often favored newcomers to the business with little to no experience building and maintaining networks. The result was wasted tax dollars and communities still on hold awaiting connection. A rigorous partner selection process should prioritize qualified, proven companies.

- **Think long-term.** Broadband deployment is not a one-and-done affair. Communities need to build networks. But they also need to ensure the infrastructure is continually strengthened and resilient over time. This requires ongoing resources and expertise. Is the infrastructure partner equipped to manage long-term upkeep? Can it send qualified technicians out, at a moment's notice, in the dead of night if necessary, to keep everyone connected?

The abundance of public and private resources being dedicated to universal connectivity puts this longstanding national objective within reach. But it will be the quality of work across the public and private sectors that ultimately determines success in making broadband's benefits real in every U.S. home and business. ❖

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