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Creating a New Fiber Broadband Labor Pipeline

As municipalities and service providers pursue fiber expansions, a larger labor force is required to transition plans from paper to reality.

When the Biden Administration announced that more than 350 organizations would participate in the White House Infrastructure Talent Pipeline Challenge, broadband was cited as one of three critical sectors for workforce development.

The need for an expanded fiber workforce has never been more pressing as communities and providers set aggressive fiber build targets. By 2025, AT&T and Frontier plan to deploy fiber to 30 and 10 million locations, respectively. Lumen will pass 12 million sites by 2027, and Brightspeed will pass 3 million in the same time frame. Meanwhile, more than 250 electric co-ops plan to deploy broadband service.

TRAINING PROGRAMS ABOUND

Several industry organizations offer fiber training programs: the Fiber Optics Association (FOA), the Fiber Broadband Association, the Communications Workers of America (CWA), Light Brigade and NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association. Working with community colleges and vocational schools, these organizations provide technology education, career placement and curricula.

The FOA certified nearly 90,000 fiber technology workers with 120,000 certifications through partnerships with community colleges and vocational schools.

The CWA has partnered with AT&T and Corning to offer and expand training and apprenticeship programs. AT&T and the CWA

plan to design broadband apprenticeship programs, work with community colleges to develop career options for current employees, and streamline tuition reimbursement for AT&T's union employees. In addition, the CWA partnered with the Chabot-Los Positas Community College District in California, and the FBA offers its OpTIC Path program through community colleges.

In Louisiana, Bossier Parish Community College, which will offer the OpTIC Path program, says it needs a way to support fiber network expansions to help the state close its digital divide by 2029.

Schools aren't the only entities actively ramping up fiber labor education. Mississippi-based Alcorn County Electric Power Association (ACE Power) is active and makes the OpTIC Path program available to its employees.

CLOSING THE FIBER SKILLS GAP

Expanding the number of skilled technicians is a critical hurdle to reaching fiber deployment goals. Improving the density of fiber broadband communities requires creating a pipeline of skilled workers. It's a worthwhile undertaking. By enhancing the fiber broadband workforce, providers create new career and economic development opportunities. ❖

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