

# New FBA Training Program Prepares People for Rewarding Fiber Careers

The FBA Optical Telecom Installation Certification (OpTIC) program teaches hands-on skills. Newly trained techs can help expedite fiber builds across the country, delivering much-needed high-speed internet.

By Deborah Kish / *Fiber Broadband Association*

**T**he years 2020 and 2021 took a toll on some workers, but offered benefits to others. COVID-19 either enabled people to work remotely or forced them to the unemployment office. A March 2021 PwC survey revealed that employees' priorities are changing – many plan to move farther away from offices, deeply value paid time off, and are focused on building adaptability and the ability to learn new skills. The number of long-term employed people is at its highest level in 60 years.

Still, many people lost their jobs due to the pandemic and may find themselves in a position for a career change. The fiber optic industry can deliver just that: career change with reward and promise.

### **FIBER DEMAND IS RISING**

The strong demand for high-speed internet service has increased significantly as a result of the growing internet of things (IoT), the popularity of streaming, the necessity of





videoconferencing, and the increasingly remote nature of work and school. As people continue to move out of crowded cities to more rural areas, slower networks will no longer suffice.

Government investments have been ongoing, including the USDA's Rural Utilities Service (RUS) ReConnect program, the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) and the Connect America Fund (CAF). In addition, the Biden administration's infrastructure bill allocates \$65 billion to broadband investment. Together, the infrastructure bill, federal subsidy programs, and state funding and private broadband investment will have a significant effect on the job market and bring a plethora of opportunities to job development.

Fiber is the backbone for 5G networks and requires people to connect fibers and complete installations. Internet service providers (ISPs) face a shortage of qualified candidates to install this critical infrastructure. In fact, in late 2020, a Fiber Broadband Association (FBA) member company reported it was 100 crews short of supporting its workload.

Other FBA members said they turned down work because they didn't have enough people. This shortage of workers will most certainly slow the

speed of rollouts in the future and keep people from accessing the critical infrastructure they need to do their jobs, learn and access health care and other vital resources.

### HOPE ON THE HORIZON

Plenty of training programs are available in community colleges and vocational schools, but they tend to be narrow in focus. The FBA Technology and Education Committees have developed a curriculum for a fiber optic technician course, the Optical Telecom Installation Certification (OpTIC) program. It's more comprehensive than other programs and gives service providers, utilities and contractors boots-on-the-ground workers who can fill broadband jobs and bridge the digital divide in rural, unserved and underserved communities.

The OpTIC course focuses on the knowledge and skills to be a fiber optic technician or journeyman working in the field, leading to a long-time career. The course teaches vital installation skills including cable prep, splicing and testing. Ambitious individuals can move on to become crew leads or managers, or move into the vendor community as product managers, or enter the business side as service

providers and contractors. The program is designed for interested people who have no prior experience working in telecom. The training is significantly longer than other courses and firmly focused on a fiber field tech's tactile, hands-on skills.

The FBA OpTIC program is a registered apprenticeship with the U.S. Department of Labor. It is also launching its pilot training course at Wilson Community College in North Carolina. In addition, the FBA is working with other community colleges, state Departments of Labor and veterans programs across the U.S. to bring people back into the workforce, develop careers and promote fiber to the home. For more information about the FBA OpTIC program, visit [www.fiberbroadband.org/certification](http://www.fiberbroadband.org/certification) or contact me at [dkish@fiberbroadband.org](mailto:dkish@fiberbroadband.org). ❖



*Deborah Kish is vice president for research and marketing at the Fiber Broadband Association. Contact her at [dkish@fiberbroadband.org](mailto:dkish@fiberbroadband.org).*