

RURAL BROADBAND INSIGHTS FOR CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE



WITH PARTNER JONATHAN CHAMBERS

Co-ops Connect FYI

By Jonathan Chambers • Jun 02, 2023

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I Get Email



The most rewarding part of my job is the response I receive from those who read my weekly email. In an age of social media, when some people can amass millions of followers, I don't reach nor seek to reach anything close to that. Each week, I aspire to have a meaningful interaction with one person. I figure if I can do that, it's a heckuva week.

I'd like to share two such interactions from last week, prompted by [the piece I wrote called "Privilege."](#)

Here's the first one:

"I absolutely love this...the fact that we can all make a difference (even a small one) and the fact that all we are called to do is love. I will be sharing this with our retirees when I send their newsletter this next month.

Good reminder to be humble, to be kind, and to think about others first."

I wrote a thousand words to say what was given back to me in eight words:

"All we are called to do is love."

Why it matters:

There are few people who would believe I share that sentiment. The experiences of my life have taught me that life is cruel and capricious. In tragic ways, I have lost or nearly lost everyone I have ever loved — parents, spouse, children.

If I come across sometimes as hard or harsh, it is more because I learned from an early age that life's blows would either break me or become a forging process that made me harder.

We all suffer life's blows. Either you bend, you break, or you harden.

I decided late in my life to use my advantages (the "privilege" I wrote of last week) to help others who are in need. Since my only professional skill relates to building and operating internet access networks, that's what I have to offer.

I Get Email, Part 2



This brings me to a second email response from last week:

“Sir, a very touching story... Verizon does not offer home internet service to my address, so I'm having to contend with data caps, throttling, and exceptionally bad and unstable connectivity. The service is so bad, I have filed a couple of complaints to the FCC to no avail with documentation demonstrating the issues I am having.

My mother passed last year. She had spent her remaining time at home in home hospice care. The day she passed, I had to drive 8 miles south before I had enough of a signal to make the call to hospice. There was zero service...”

Heartbreaking.

Why it matters:

I shouldn't need to point it out but I will.

- The telephone company in this man's area received millions of dollars in public funds from the FCC to provide rural service — **a service that it abandoned.**
- Verizon and AT&T received billions in free spectrum (a public resource) from the FCC — **spectrum that lies fallow but is still protected by the FCC from anyone else's use.**

Perhaps a topic for another day, but:

- Congress is considering re-authorizing the FCC's spectrum auction authority.
- Thirty years ago, the original auction authority was drafted by my team on the Senate Commerce Committee, sponsored by my boss, Senator Danforth, and added to the 1993 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act.
- The FCC subsequently raised tens of billions of dollars through auction and still left rural America unserved.

If I knew then what I know now, I would have recommended that fallow spectrum remain a public resource.

Perhaps Congress can now repair the FCC's error.

- **Spectrum in rural areas could be reclaimed** by the people who live there.
- If that happens, we will build 5G networks in addition to fiber networks.

The Big Picture



Back to the email from my friend:

“I have zero reliable options where I live ... until now, that is. Since I heard the [Conexon] announcement, I have gone to every monthly co-op meeting, keeping tabs on fiber to the home they are offering and installing, and I read your newsletter and forward it every time it is in my email box.

It is nice to see an organization and persons who are willing to forgo the ‘profits’ to provide reliable and stable internet service to those of us who have been overlooked and ignored just because there wasn't any money to be made.”

The coup de grâce from this email:

“P.S. I am also contending with health issues. My primary doctor, heart doctors, and a few other specialists are at the VA Medical Center. These offices are between 50 minutes to 1.5 hour drive for me.

Phone and video appointments would make a few of those appointments a whole lot easier, but because of the internet service being pretty cruddy, those appointments are very difficult to have, and when they do happen, it is very stressful and nerve-racking just waiting for the lost network connection.”

Why it matters:

Last week, the nation celebrated Memorial Day. We honor the men and women who fought and died for our country.

Let’s honor those who served and need us to step up: There are VA hospitals across the country who could better serve our vets if internet access in rural areas was improved.

Let’s honor our vets. Honor each other.

Who will step up? Don't count on the VA, or the FCC, or other federal agencies. Don't count on Congress. Don't count on state broadband offices or other state agencies. Don't count on AT&T or Verizon or T-Mobile or Comcast or Charter or Cox or CenturyLink or Windstream or Frontier.

Count on each other — which is to say, *count on your cooperative*. They've been reliable for 85 years. And if you don't belong to an electric cooperative that can help, form a new broadband cooperative.

Let's get to work.



*Feel free to forward this **Co-ops Connect FYI** to colleagues who want to stay in the know on all things broadband! Subscribe to Conexon's weekly newsletter [here](#).*

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