U.S. SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT & WORKPLACE SAFETY
TUESDAY, MAY 3, 2022

Good morning. My name is Ron Holcomb, and I am the President and CEO of Tipmont Wintek.

It is an honor to be invited to provide testimony to the United States Senate Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety on the subject of the broadband workforce and barriers to broadband expansion.

On behalf of our entire team at Tipmont Wintek, I would like to thank Senator Braun for the invitation to testify, Senator Hickenlooper for chairing the subcommittee, and all members of the subcommittee for their work to pursue strategic and sustainable solutions on today's topics.

Tipmont Wintek: Empowering People and Communities

First, I would like to offer some background on Tipmont Wintek and our mission.

Tipmont Wintek is a premier regional provider of energy and communication services in north-central Indiana — a team of 110 that is collectively empowering people and communities with state-of-the-art essential services.

Tipmont is a rural electric membership corporation, or REMC, founded in 1939. Today, as a member-owned cooperative governed by a board of directors, our REMC provides electric service to over 25,000 people in eight Indiana counties.

In January 2019, Tipmont acquired Wintek Corporation, a technology company in Lafayette, Indiana, which had provided leading-edge technology solutions for nearly a half-century. In addition to electric service, Tipmont Wintek also builds state-of-the-art, fiber-to-the-home broadband service in the REMC's electric-service area, along with customized business technology solutions.

Workforce Development = Broadband Development

I have been asked here today to discuss workforce development and broadband development. In America today, these are indivisible notions.

If a community wants to attract top talent, it must provide broadband access that is uncomplicated and uncompromised. This expectation is especially true for young workers.

Just ask my kids, who are in their late 20s, what they would do if asked to choose between excellent broadband and heat in their homes. They would take the internet and put on a coat.

If a community lacks fast, reliable and affordable broadband, people will simply choose to live elsewhere. This has been a problem for years in our largely rural service area and in much of rural America.

The Real Definition of Broadband

The problem begins with an inadequate definition of broadband.

In rural America, “broadband” means whatever technology a carrier can deliver. Satellite internet is called broadband. DSL is called broadband. Constrained wireless technology? That is called broadband, too.

What these definitions are missing is whether the service adequately meets a customer’s need.

If a doctor needs to read radiological studies from their home in real time, *that* is broadband. If an entrepreneur needs basement servers for a startup, *that* is broadband. If a family of four needs to be online all at once, *that* is broadband.

At Tipmont Wintek, we define broadband as whatever our customers need to pursue their goals.

That level of broadband was not available to them, for reasons I will discuss in a bit, and that is why we made the choice to build a superior broadband option for our service area.

Broadband Workforces Face Unique Challenges

To accomplish our mission, Tipmont Wintek has built a broadband workforce encompassing everyone from high-school graduates to engineers who have master's degrees.

As we built this team, we found a unique catch-22: Inferior broadband in our communities can make it hard to entice the technical professionals and tradespeople we need to build something better.

This is why we must find people inspired to improve the quality of life in the very communities they call home. We are among many businesses today that face challenges in finding these people.

Building and Nurturing a Broadband Workforce

It can be difficult to get any person to apply let alone the *right* one.

For example: Tipmont Wintek recently opened a position on our construction crew. The requirements were a high-school diploma or equivalent GED, along with a valid driver's license. We spoke with eight candidates on the phone and invited them all for in-person interviews. Only two showed up. Of the other six, one pursued a different opportunity and five never returned our calls about scheduling a follow-up.

As a not-for-profit, we also struggle to compete with wages offered by for-profit companies and contractors, particularly in areas of skilled-trade labor. Escalating wages is a case of supply-and-demand imbalance for these skills in the market, which I do not believe will correct anytime soon.

Despite these challenges, Tipmont Wintek has thrived by reframing its approach to talent acquisition. Rather than pursue a “perfect” employee, we prioritize the development of the right people and their potential.

At Tipmont Wintek, we seek proactive problem-solvers with insatiable curiosity — the kind who crave continuous education and diversified responsibilities.

One such person is Peter Burr. A U.S. Army veteran, Peter joined us in 2021 as a Construction Specialist. His work involves outdoor engineering to run fiber along customers’ properties to their homes.

Peter had no experience with fiber-optic engineering but excelled at project management. We leveraged that skill and gave Peter plenty of field time with established fiber engineers. He has since taken on responsibility for electrical engineering tasks as well as our co-op’s electric solar initiatives. These were new to Peter, too, but we equipped him with classes and external resources that set him up for success.

In Peter’s own words: “It has been encouraging to see how Tipmont Wintek develops people within their own organization. I am helping meet the company’s long-term goals while directly benefiting from their trust in me to learn and acquire new skill sets.”

We also reassessed the education levels of applicants relative to their promise and potential fit with the company.

In the past, many Tipmont Wintek broadband positions required a specialized, four-year engineering degree. To retain essential expertise, some still do. But for more entry-level positions, we now consider candidates with two-year degrees in computer-related fields and an eagerness to jump in and learn.

Our local Network Operations Center has become a proving ground through which to develop and diversify the skills and experiences of our broadband workforce. We give our team members meaningful projects in customer service, cybersecurity, system analysis, network engineering, computer programming, and more. It challenges, engages and motivates them while building a clear, comprehensive picture of our broadband mission.

As broadband needs evolve, so will the need to expand activities that develop a strong, engaged broadband workforce. One potential solution may be a state-facilitated broadband apprenticeship program like the Rural Electric Apprenticeship Program (REAP) facilitated by Indiana Electric Cooperatives (IEC). REAP is a four-year program requiring 612 hours of comprehensive classroom instruction and at least 8,000 hours of on-the-job training. REAP has certainly benefited our co-op, and IEC has discussed a broadband equivalent.

Dustin Manns, one of our electric linemen, says his REAP experience provided him “an opportunity to create professional value and become a better person.”

What Dustin says is a crucial notion at the front of our minds as we develop people: We can build all the skills we want, but it will mean nothing if the process does not reflect both a person’s career goals and Tipmont Wintek’s values of innovation, public service heart, impact, respect and passion.

Of course, finding the right people is half the battle. We must retain them with genuine professional fulfillment. There are many elements to this, but fueling their drive to learn more is chief among them.

That is why Tipmont Wintek prioritizes continuing education and training. That is why we send our broadband team to Cisco to earn the latest top-tier certification on complex network equipment. Helping our IT professionals keep pace with ever-changing technology is especially critical.

Building a broadband workforce has not been without growing pains or a bit of trial and error. But Tipmont Wintek has found a formula that works for our employees and, most of all, for our customers.

Developing Generational Broadband Talent

We also have started building tomorrow's team today.

Generation Z is transforming today's workforce. They want to make the world better, and their values inform their decisions. Deloitte's Global 2021 Millennial and Generation Z Survey showed that, in the last two years, 49% of those in Generation Z made choices about their work, and their employer, based on alignment with their personal values.

It is our obligation to channel this passion and purpose into fulfilling careers. To that end, Tipmont Wintek has developed numerous broadband career outreach programs that reach a wide continuum of ages.

Sparking Interest at Early Ages

Tipmont Wintek sponsors and participates in both the Next Generation Workforce Expo and the Construction Career & Education (C2E) Expo, which serve eighth graders through 12th graders.

Facilitated by Greater Lafayette Commerce, the Next Generation Workforce Expo features experiential activities that address facets of the manufacturing industry.

Tipmont Wintek's role is to discuss broadband and energy careers as they relate to manufacturing, the importance of broadband access for manufacturers, and the manufacturing industry's essential need for cybersecurity.

At the C2E Expo, which focuses on construction infrastructure, Tipmont Wintek initiates spirited, influential conversations with young people about everything from fiber broadband and electric engineering to careers for those overseeing the fiber installation process.

These expos engage those who may not plan to attend college after high school but want to flourish in meaningful technical careers.

Hands-On Pathways to Broadband IT Careers

Tipmont Wintek is also collaborating with Faith Christian Schools in Lafayette, Indiana, to develop a pathway program in Career Technical Education, or CTE, which will be open to 600-plus students from an eight-county area.

This hands-on, comprehensive CTE curriculum will start in the 2022-23 school year and inspire students to consider a career path in energy or broadband IT.

It will begin with an overview of basics about the energy and broadband fiber services Tipmont Wintek provides. Our professionals will visit classrooms to discuss their experiences with students — helping them envision careers and hear first-hand from those who have thrived. Students can job-shadow our electric engineers, broadband fiber engineers, and others. They will also tour our state-of-the-art data center, which provides technology solutions for hundreds of businesses in Indiana and beyond.

This is a pilot program, but we are confident that we will be able to expand this experience to additional schools in our service area, as well as the Greater Lafayette Career Academy.

Complementing Career Interest with Civic Awareness

As great as it might be for us, we realize not everyone wants to pursue careers in broadband or energy. By participating in a local Junior Achievement Finance Park, Tipmont Wintek emphasizes the broader civic importance of affordable, reliable and equitable broadband.

At the Finance Park, seventh and eighth graders perform interactive budgeting exercises. We did such things, too, when we were younger. If you had internet in these exercises, it was likely under “leisure” or “entertainment.” Today, broadband access is no less essential than electricity. Our participation in the Finance Park helps young people understand: Equitable broadband access is a lifelong engine that moves everyone down a positive path.

A Pipeline of Phenomenal Talent

We also foster productive partnerships that have brought tremendous talent to our doorstep.

Ivy Tech Community College is a statewide system in Indiana with a large campus in our service area. Tipmont Wintek’s broadband leadership team provides Ivy Tech instructors in the School of Information Technology with practical feedback in the IT field that informs their curriculum.

In return, we gain access to a pool of bright, motivated students whose talent we can develop. Several students through this pipeline have become assets on our broadband team. Among them: David Flint, a U.S. Army veteran who joined us as he pursued his associate degree in Network Infrastructure and is now a Network Engineer; Mallory Herbert, who applies network engineering expertise toward consulting solutions for our business internet customers; and Dylan Popp, who started with us as a Network Technician and, in January, advanced to our team of Network Engineers.

Industry Apprenticeship & Community Partnership

These broadband workforce outreach programs address several goals.

They create a culture of industry-focused apprenticeships. It is Tipmont Wintek's duty to provide a model for what young people can do with their futures *and* build relationships to get them there. For example: As we continue to develop these outreach programs, a high-school senior could work beside the professionals who inspired them through a post-graduation internship and then perhaps gain full-time employment with us.

These programs also affirm Tipmont Wintek's position as a community partner. It is our obligation to invest in a community's people and prosperity, which includes encouraging our youngest citizens.

Last but certainly not least, these programs can keep Tipmont Wintek's broadband workforce vital by introducing individuals to exciting combinations of new skills, perspectives, voices and expertise.

Tipmont Wintek's workforce outreach programs create meaningful outlets that can propel Generation Z, and other world-changing generations to follow, into the broadband workforce.

The Perils of Insufficient Internet

No matter what their generation is, everyone on Tipmont Wintek's broadband team agrees: If it is not fiber, it is not broadband.

Wireless solutions have a place in select mobile applications and rural research, such as gathering, sending and analyzing agricultural data. Beyond that, it suffers from issues with network capacity, signal interference and dropped connections.

No one can run a successful business off inferior wireless technology. Just ask Susan Benedict, a Tipmont electric cooperative customer who owns an interior design business.

Susan can see the city limits of Lafayette, Indiana, from her back porch. This metro area of 200,000 people is home to Purdue University, a major international research institution. And yet the best anyone would do for Susan's internet access was a DSL phone line.

DSL struggles with reliability. DSL speeds are generally poor — 20 Mbps download and 10 Mbps upload … *maybe*. Susan told us her time spent offline — and in battles with customer support — created a 25% loss for her business.

The story of Dr. Sara Huffer, a neurologist who lost access to life-saving technology because of poor internet, is particularly upsetting.

Dr. Huffer's hospital system received telemedicine equipment that allowed her to assess a stroke patient's condition as soon as they arrived at the ER. This equipment helped medical professionals more quickly provide clot-busting medication to rural patients who lacked access to specialists. The faster someone gets this medicine, the less likely they are to suffer permanent disability or death.

But Dr. Huffer's hospital had to discontinue this program — largely because her DSL home internet connection was too slow to access it. Now, people in Dr. Huffer's community lose time they do not have when faced with a life-threatening medical emergency.

In the wake of COVID 19, so many across our service area shifted on a dime to online-only interactions. This upended life even for those with reliable broadband access. Those without it faced a full-blown threat to their livelihoods, educational development, and health and wellness.

We heard from teachers who drove all over their district, delivering thumb drives loaded with resources for kids who could not get online. Families sent children to live with relatives who had a more reliable internet connection. Professionals drove to a McDonald's parking lot so they could use free WiFi to connect to work meetings.

These people are used to pulling together solutions. That is because they are used to being left behind.

When you look at the struggles faced by Susan Benedict, Dr. Sara Huffer, and countless families, children, educators, and professionals, you see a rural broadband market in crisis.

You see people who need broadband that meets their needs without compromise.

America's Broadband Policy Does Not Work For Everyone

America's rural broadband market design applies a private-sector business model to a public-infrastructure deficiency. It is time we admit that this is not working.

This policy presumes an open, competitive process in the private sector will provide customers with numerous options for robust service. Although the private sector has its place in broadband policy, its business model relies upon investments that shareholders find acceptable. This model works in sizable towns and cities but rarely in areas with low population density and high fixed costs.

In rural America, the demand for fast, affordable and reliable broadband far exceeds the supply. What little supply there is lacks both an obligation to serve people *and* robust performance standards as defined by consumers' needs.

In April 2022, the Center for Regional Development at Purdue University published ***Home Broadband Survey Results: Connecting Indiana.*** This study surveyed more than 16,000 people from 20 counties in mostly rural Indiana and reported the following findings:

- Nearly 30% of respondents said they do not have internet service because it is not available to them.
- Nearly half of the people said their internet service was not reliable enough to work from home, which jeopardizes their livelihoods.
- More than 40% of respondents had students in their home, ranging from pre-kindergarten all the way to college age. Unreliable internet can cause students to struggle with e-learning, making it difficult to develop necessary skills that lead to successful careers.
- Nearly 10% of those surveyed had seniors 65 or older in their home, whose reliance on telehealth and telemedicine is threatened by a lack of reliable internet access.

If rural broadband were profitable, America's broadband policy would suffice. But in most cases, it is not profitable. The results relegate rural America to second-tier status. We *must* consider alternatives.

Our Calling to Provide Better Broadband

Tipmont Wintek provides security, comfort and convenience through essential services. When it came to fast, reliable and affordable internet, our longtime electric customers lacked all three. That is why we chose to do what no one else would and bring them essential broadband access they deserve.

When Tipmont Wintek builds, we meet everyone's needs through equal access to superior technology. For co-ops like ours, this is simply part of our intrinsic obligation to serve.

Balancing the priorities of people, purpose and a sustainable business model is a hallmark of cooperatives. It transformed electrification in rural America, and we knew we could do the same in the space of rural broadband internet.

There is No Better Broadband Investment Than Fiber

But first, we needed to understand the impact of this investment on the communities we serve.

In 2018, Tipmont commissioned Purdue University to study and calculate the societal economic return of a fiber-broadband investment in the counties we serve. We did this because we measure success both by our own financial health *and* the prosperity of our customers' communities.

The study found that for every dollar Tipmont invested in fiber-optic broadband technology for a community, that community and the State of Indiana would receive $4 in return benefits. These returns came through tax revenue, telemedicine, K-12 and adult education, consumer savings, farm income, and multiplier impacts.

In expanding this study to cover the territory of all Indiana electric co-ops, the result was staggering. If every co-op in Indiana built broadband, the statewide net present value benefit of that investment would be $12 billion over 20 years.

Tipmont Wintek launched its broadband project without capital support, but we estimated that a 20% capital contribution could significantly increase sustainability and reduce project risk. In other words: That capital support would have made our decision much easier.

Bridging this capital gap triggers a project launch. Therefore, broadband grant funding is of utmost importance. But what return does the taxpayer see once federal or state grants enter the picture?

Consider the Tipmont Wintek case. Per the 2018 study, a $1 investment in broadband yields a societal economic return of $4. Now, factor in a 20% grant capital contribution. A utility like Tipmont Wintek then contributes 80 cents of every investment dollar while federal or state grant programs contribute 20 cents.

Taxpayers put in 20 cents and get $4 back. That is a 20 to 1 return. Investments in America do not get better than that.

Pitfalls of the Grant Funding Process

Capital support from grant funding has been pivotal to Tipmont Wintek's fiber build. We are grateful to have received over $20 million in funding from the State of Indiana and $1 million in federal funding.

However, there are areas of concern we discovered in the process.

1. Unreliable Self-Reporting of Coverage

At all government levels, broadband grant programs too often rely on outdated or inaccurate data to determine an applicant's eligibility.

For example: Service coverage data provided by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for use in federal and state grant programs came from internet service providers (ISPs) that self-reported.

Unsurprisingly, these ISPs overstated their service coverage. For example: If an ISP served just *one* customer, often a business, it could mark an entire census block as "served."

Allowing any broadband provider to self-report broadband coverage and quality as a barometer for grant funding is like asking the fox to count the hens. It does not make sense and often denies people equitable access.

2. Disingenuous Application Challenges

Many broadband providers then used this unreliable data and overstated coverage as a basis to challenge grant applications from competing providers (who often offer superior service).

For example: In Round 2 of the State of Indiana's Next Level Connections (NLC) Broadband Grant Program, other ISPs successfully challenged 371 of Tipmont Wintek's census block applications — claiming they already received federal funding to provide coverage in that census block.

Even if the providers who issued these challenges met federal grant program requirements, there was no transparency as to what they intended to build or how long it would take them.

This is an inordinate amount of effort expended on blocking competition rather than serving customers in need.

Thankfully, the FCC recently has announced a new coverage verification process, with new maps scheduled for fall 2022. These maps will hopefully be based on efforts to gather accurate data from everyday Americans' self-provided speed tests rather than data reported by carriers.

I cannot overstate the importance of accurate coverage data to address rural broadband inequity, and I appreciate the efforts undertaken to obtain *actual* data.

Ideas to Improve Federal Broadband Grant Processes

While we appreciate any grant program advancing equitable broadband access, Tipmont Wintek has found state programs more successful than federal programs in helping address a rural digital divide.

Here are key reasons and rationales as to why.

1. The application process for state programs is less prohibitive and cumbersome.

Federal programs impose onerous requirements before the application process even begins — registration on the System for Award Management website, a Dun & Bradstreet D-U-N-S Number, a Commercial and Government Entity (CAGE) Code, an Authorized Representative Request. Many also require a legal opinion, environmental analysis, credit thresholds, and details on equipment sourcing, contractors, engineering services, or bidding.

The application guide for the latest round of the United States Department of Agriculture's ReConnect Loan and Grant Program runs 273 pages. On average, application guides for state programs are 20 to 30 pages.

A one-size-fits-all application process also overlooks specific circumstances of rural areas in need.

For example: The FCC's Rural Development Opportunity Fund (RDOF) only allows bidding at the census block group level while ReConnect requires geographically contiguous projects. Existing infrastructure and communities do not conform to these arbitrary groupings, making it difficult to piece together projects.

2. Conditions of state programs are clearly defined.

ReConnect defines sufficient broadband speed as 100 Mbps download / 25 Mbps upload (or 100/25). RDOF defines the same thing as 25 Mbps download / 3 Mbps upload (or 25/3).

Why are these definitions different? Moreover, why are they *so* different? And why does neither address a consumer's real needs?

Purdue University's ***Home Broadband Survey Results: Connecting Indiana*** study from April 2022 published results of 5,000 speed tests from rural addresses in 20 Indiana counties. Over 60% of those tests — or more than 3,000 individual internet connections — failed to meet the FCC's minimum speed threshold of 25/3.

ReConnect- and RDOF-funded projects also often deliver speeds *just* above these speed definitions. These are not solutions for equitable broadband access in rural America. They are stop-gaps that slow economic growth, require early and costly replacement, and prolong unnecessary suffering.

Grant funding *should* prioritize broadband speed that is symmetrical and scalable to the customers' specific needs.

I cite the same Purdue study from April: "As more and more homes remote work and e-learn, symmetrical connections are needed — when upload speeds are as fast as download speeds."

Has your voice or video ever lagged for an agonizingly long time in an important Zoom meeting? Has your child become frustrated that their computer cannot keep pace with the tempo of e-learning? These are the perils of a broadband connection that is not symmetrical, and they jeopardize confidence, growth and even livelihoods.

As for scale: If the consumer needs a gigabit, or 1,000 Mbps, we need to provide that. If they need *two* gigabits, we need to provide *that*.

Speed thresholds in state broadband grant programs reward symmetrical, scalable connections. For example: The State of Indiana's NLC program prioritizes connections with symmetrical-speed minimums of 100 Mbps upload and download.

Tipmont Wintek's entry-level in-home fiber internet package exceeds this minimum by 150%, and we have been grateful to receive $20 million from NLC since 2019 — including $3 million last month for new projects to begin in 2022.

3. Communication with state program facilitators is strong and consistent.

Beyond application deadlines, timelines for federal broadband grant programs are nebulous. For example: Applications for the latest round of ReConnect grants were due March 9, 2022, but we do not yet know a decision deadline. That makes it hard to forecast resources when supply chain interruptions have already complicated scheduling for broadband builds.

Outside of webinars, Tipmont Wintek staff also have never spoken directly with those administering federal broadband grant programs. If we reach out, we are lucky to receive a reply. We once spent months trying to contact a representative of ReConnect … only to learn we now had a new representative.

Tipmont Wintek also recently partnered with Tippecanoe County — one of eight counties we serve — to pursue a grant from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's Broadband Infrastructure Program. We did not receive the grant and were not told why. Were we somehow ineligible? Did an incumbent internet service provider (ISP) challenge our application? Was our application simply not as competitive?

Facilitators of state broadband grant programs provide a comprehensive timeline of key dates and deadlines, regular contact, and constructive feedback if an application is not accepted.

4. State programs improve processes and outcomes with accurate, manageable data.

Reporting is necessary in any broadband grant program. However, federal program reporting is overly burdensome.

The Rural Development Reporting & Compliance User Guide for ReConnect is 103 pages. By comparison, we submit a 10-page quarterly report for each project with the State of Indiana's NLC program.

5. Administrator feedback in state grant challenge phases allows for productive adaptation.

Administrators of state broadband grant programs often request applicant feedback on their policies and processes to implement changes in future rounds of funding. For example: The State of Indiana's NLC increased its minimum speed threshold for sufficient broadband based on feedback and data from Tipmont Wintek and other applicants.

With each new round, the NLC process becomes more efficient and productive. By comparison, after three rounds of the ReConnect program, there have only been minor updates to the process.

Broadband Grants Are Best Managed at State Levels

To Tipmont, the ideal use of broadband grant program funds, as well as those provided by the American Rescue Plan Act, incorporates a strategic, swift-moving combination of federal, state and local administration.

It is important to involve state administrators in conversations and decisions, and they should play a lead role in broadband grant management and disbursement.

I express these concerns about federal broadband grant programs not to criticize them or their facilitators. I share them in the hope that it can lead to streamlined processes and improved outcomes that accomplish our shared mission of equitable broadband access.

Fiber is the Premier Broadband Technology

The only way to truly fulfill our shared mission is through fiber-to-the-home broadband.

Building fiber infrastructure from the ground up is not simple or quick. It requires months of planning, engineering and construction. We must pursue easements and right-of-way agreements. But as the saying goes, the right way and the hard way are often the same.

Tipmont Wintek has chosen fiber because there is no better future-proof broadband technology. The fiber lines we are laying today will work just as well decades from now. Service upgrades require only updated electronics on both ends of the connection.

Purdue's ***Home Broadband Survey Results: Connecting Indiana*** study from April reinforced that we have chosen the right materials to serve our customers.

The study found that fiber-optic broadband technology such as that offered by Tipmont Wintek provides the largest "bang for the buck" when it comes to internet cost, speed and satisfaction.

Fiber was a runaway winner in all points of comparison to satellite, DSL, cable, fixed wireless or cellular data. And yet of the 88% surveyed who have home internet, only 5.5% connected using fiber.

Many providers fail to give people what they need in today's world to remain truly connected and competitive. But Tipmont Wintek is determined despite the risks.

And our customers love it.

We have seen all-time highs in our score on the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), a national benchmark to assess customers' feelings about products or services they use. Compared to other service providers — who often land in the high 60s on a 100-point scale — our customer satisfaction is much higher.

Tipmont Wintek recently scored an all-time high 85 out of 100. That is enough to beat Chick-fil-A, which almost always tops the ACSI. If only we could include chicken sandwiches in our monthly packages.

4,000 People Connected … and Counting

Jokes aside, that ACSI score is the result of demanding work from a lot of dedicated people. This work is reciprocated by the trust that our customers have placed in us to deliver for them on broadband as we have for electricity. This work also reflects our commitment to continue evolving broadband workforce development even further.

Since 2019, Tipmont Wintek has connected more than 4,000 people to our fast, reliable and affordable fiber broadband. By the time this day is over, we will have connected 10 more.

The stories we hear today are much happier.

One of our customers has a child with a disability. Their spouse stayed home with the child while they worked a job with preferable health care benefits. Once Tipmont Wintek fiber broadband became available to them, the spouse who stayed home was able to take a job and work remotely.

In just *one* home, our fiber broadband created employment, increased a family's income considerably, contributed to workforce development, and created new paths for resources to assist with raising a child.

Then there is Kassie Coverdale, who traded an engineering job she enjoyed for a career she was passionate about — her own professional dog training business. Just as that was taking off, COVID-19 hit. Thanks in part to our fiber broadband, Kassie did not miss a beat. She transformed her hands-on approach into a successful online business.

Multiply those stories by several thousand. These are the sorts of generational differences that a fast, reliable and affordable fiber-to-the-home connection can make.

This is how to help America's best and brightest talents consider making a home in rural communities.

This is what you can accomplish by building a broadband workforce that develops people and potential.

This is why we must reframe our definition of rural broadband and rethink broadband policy.

This is the way we can empower all rural American families, children, businesses, entrepreneurs, and educators through broadband — and improve their quality of life by ensuring their broadband service meets them where they are.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify before the subcommittee today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have and continuing this conversation further.