

FINAL

*Oral Testimony of Bernadine Joselyn, Director, Public Policy & Engagement, Blandin Foundation
before the U.S Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation's Subcommittee on
Communications, Technology, and the Internet
October 29, 2013*

Chairman Pryor, Senator Wicker, Members of the Committee:

I bring to you today the voices and experiences of rural community leaders. These are the people who create vibrancy across the American landscape. They are hopeful people and they can make a little support go a very long way.

For example...

Janice Gale, director of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe's Temporary Employment Program, saw every day how tribal members struggled with technology when applying for jobs. She worked with us and partners to create sustainable systems for teaching culturally-relevant online job search and work skills, and to expand computer and internet access on the reservation.

Tribal members who upgrade their digital literacy skills now qualify for higher pay. Janice smiles with pride when she tells of the workers in her program who have been inspired to pursue a GED.

Multiply Janice Gale times hundreds.

And the stories continue to roll in from communities all across rural Minnesota, where adoption is not just a policy imperative, but a community imperative.

Blandin Foundation works with rural communities in Minnesota. We have made broadband adoption a priority because we believe that:

1. Broadband is the indispensable infrastructure of the 21st century, and
2. Rural communities need broadband access and the ability to use it, in order to thrive in this globalized economy.

One of our projects, the Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities Initiative (MIRC), had the support of the American people through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Blandin Foundation administered MIRC on behalf of a coalition of 19 statewide partners and 11 rural communities. Our work was funded partially through the federal Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP), one of 44 sustainable adoption grants awarded nationwide.

Through MIRC, we sought:

- To support and encourage broadband adoption as a strategy for job growth and wealth creation;
- To increase the “culture of use” of broadband services; and
- To improve efficiency and effectiveness of digital literacy training.

In sum, helping rural communities keep up globally was our real task.

Thanks to ARRA funding, we were able to take on an ambitious, comprehensive, multi-sector effort that wove together community level work with state-wide engagement.

MIRC set measurable goals. All were accomplished or exceeded: details have been submitted for the record. Here's just one highlight: broadband adoption in participating MIRC communities grew 15% faster than in the rest of rural Minnesota. But subscription rates tell only part of the story – and not even the most important part.

Here are just a few examples:

Thief River Falls launched a collaboration between local broadband providers and a nonprofit to supply refurbished computers, reduced-rate broadband subscriptions, and digital literacy courses to low-income families. 84% of these first-time computer owners have continued their broadband subscriptions after their subsidies ended.

Akeley's business community built a series of peer-led technology workshops that have helped entrepreneurs bring their businesses to the next level using more sophisticated Internet-based tools.

An immigrant resource center in *Winona* launched digital literacy training in Hmong and Spanish for recent immigrants.

A consortium of nine school districts in *Stevens County* developed broadband-based distance learning services for students with disabilities.

This is complex work, with many moving parts. I will, however, sum up the policy implications succinctly:

- Access to broadband is key.
- So is adoption.
- And community engagement works.

On behalf of Blandin Foundation, our partners, and the people of rural America who do the hard work of broadband adoption every day, it is my honor to share our work with you.

I want to close with one more voice, that of Kristin Fake, small business owner in Akeley, Minnesota, describing the impact of MIRC on her town:

“We’ve turned a corner and become a community that’s actually growing and thriving.”

Thank you.