

This is a sidebar that I wrote for "How States Are Expanding Broadband Access," a report by The Pew Charitable Trusts that was published in February 2020.



Broadband's Arrival Means More Opportunities in Rural Wisconsin

On a Monday morning in October, Frank Pearson woke at 6 a.m., poured himself some coffee, and helped his wife, Erika, prepare breakfast for their large family. Outside, two cattle stood in a paddock near a big red barn, and a dozen chickens roamed the 20-acre property.

It was time for Frank to go to work. But instead of getting in his car and turning on the ignition, he went upstairs to his office and turned on his computer.

It's a lifestyle that he's not going to trade in and that only recently became possible. Seven years ago, the Pearsons began to scout houses in Oulu, a small (pop. 528) northern Wisconsin town in an area surrounded by forests, less than 20 miles from Lake Superior. "We wanted to raise our kids in this environment," Frank said. But a move hinged on one thing: connectivity. "I needed," said the software engineer, who develops websites, "to be able to work from home."

Until less than a decade ago, that would have been difficult in Oulu. Broadband was nonexistent in the Bayfield County town, one of several areas in Wisconsin that were largely unserved by cable or wireless carriers.

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That started to change in 2013, when the state launched the Broadband Expansion Grant Program, which incentivizes providers to bring reliable high-speed internet service to rural parts of the state that lacked it or are underserved. Since then, the Wisconsin Broadband Office (WBO) has awarded about \$20.1 million to 138 grant projects.

Norvado, a telephone cooperative that primarily serves Bayfield County, had gotten a head start in 2007 by beginning to lay fiber after receiving funds from a federal stimulus measure. But it wasn't until 2015 when Norvado, using its own capital and an initial \$19,282 grant from the WBO, was able to begin building out into very rural areas, bringing fiber from roadside underground lines to people's homes.

Scottie Sandstrom, then Bayfield's economic development executive director, saw broadband's transformative potential. In 2017, after learning that people in a small city in neighboring Minnesota were telecommuting, he asked Angie Dickison, the WBO's then-director, if he could declare Bayfield the telecommuter capital of Wisconsin.

She replied that the office lacked a way to do so but added that the Wisconsin State Telecommunications Association was also interested in promoting telecommuting. The association helped draft legislation to create Telecommuter Forward!—a statewide program to certify communities with broadband infrastructure in place and offer support for this activity. The state Legislature passed the measure in 2017, and Bayfield County became the first Telecommuter Forward!-certified community in the nation.

The WBO has since approved an additional 30 such communities. The certification requires them to task someone with building relationships with the broadband provider or providers and connecting them with businesses that may support telecommuters. The program also helps Telecommuter Forward! communities share best practices with other locales.

Norvado, which received three more state grants totaling \$928,000, now offers telecommuter packages with speeds of up to 1 Gb per second download and 100 Mb per second upload that can be billed directly to employers. Because it's a cooperative, Norvado's net income goes back to customers over time, said CEO Chad Young. Based on the applications his customers use, Young estimates that about 30 percent of Norvado's customers now work remotely in some form.

Dickison said the arrival of broadband has meant fewer people leaving the county for urban areas.

Said Sandstrom, "It's helping the economy."

It certainly helped Frank and Erika Pearson. Once they identified a property in Oulu, they learned that their new neighbors either had broadband or were getting it. "When we were told that fiber was going to be installed at the property we liked," Frank remembered, "we said OK."

Having a lightning-fast connection has also enabled the Pearson children—eight of them, with another on the way—to follow an online curriculum set by a public charter school in Hayward, Wisconsin, an option the couple prefers over sending them to the school—a 45-minute drive. For years, studying at home also allowed the Pearson kids to help raise dairy cows and other livestock.

"We feel blessed," Frank said. Broadband "has allowed us to be in this area where we wanted to be and contribute to this small community. It's essential to our life here."