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Roundtable Touts Importance Of Broadband Expansion

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Woodsville High School senior Haley Spencer takes part in a rural broadband roundtable at the Sugar Hill Meeting House on Thursday, Jan. 4, 2024. (Photo by Paul Hayes)

How important is a good internet connection in rural New Hampshire?

Haley Spencer can tell you.

Months after COVID struck, Spencer enrolled as a freshman at Woodsville High School.



She arrived from the tiny town of Warren (population 844), where the internet service was inadequate for virtual learning.

That made it nearly impossible for her to access online assignments, attend Zoom classes, and forge friendships with new classmates.

Between academic struggles and social isolation, she nearly dropped out.

“I was in such an unfortunate situation,” Spencer said. “It caused me so much stress, so much anxiety, [that] I had to start therapy.”

Spencer told her story during a roundtable discussion at the Sugar Hill Meeting House on Thursday.

The event, co-hosted by U.S. Sen. Maggie Hassan, White House senior advisor Tom Perez and Biden Administration broadband czar Alan Davidson, announced a major investment in rural broadband expansion.

In September, Grafton County received \$12 million in federal funds to strengthen its 222-mile broadband fiber optic backbone so that those living in the countryside, like Spencer, aren’t left behind.

While her story ended well — Spencer is ranked second in her class and expects to graduate early this month — she called for improvements to help future students.

“I went through that experience and I think it made me a stronger person, but I don’t wish it on anybody else,” said Spencer to the federal officials. “I truly am glad that you’re providing reliable internet for the kids who are coming up now, because the world is unpredictable. Nobody knows what’s going to happen and if we have another pandemic, if we have another COVID rising, these kids need to be able to learn.”

The hour-long roundtable sent a clear message: Reliable, high speed internet is essential for residents of Grafton County’s 24 communities to learn, work, communicate, and access justice and healthcare.

“Internet access isn’t a luxury. It’s a necessity,” Hassan said. “It’s a necessity not just for people who are trying to work remotely, but for students and for teachers, for small business owners, for medical providers and more.”

That message was hammered home by participants.

While their perspectives on the issue differed, they, like Spencer, agreed the pandemic revealed the problems with, and importance of, internet access in the region.

“PRIORITY NUMBER ONE”

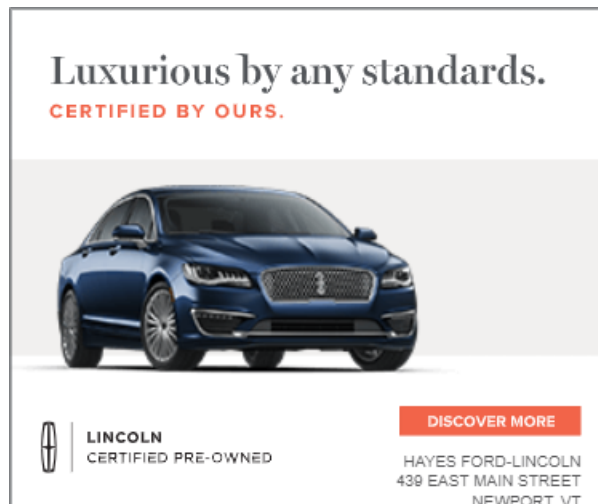
Haverhill Town Manager Brigitte Codling said that COVID revealed the extent of her town’s connectivity problems.

Many households had slow connections and 252 homes had no internet access whatsoever. Frustrated full-time and part-time residents, some unable to work or learn remotely, flooded town hall with complaints.

“It became priority number one,” Codling said.

She joined the county broadband committee, helped bring a “middle mile” project into Haverhill, secured a \$1 million grant for “last mile” connections through a public-private partnership.

Now, Haverhill is poised to bridge the digital divide among its 4,600 residents.



“Hopefully, in the next 18 months, every single home in Haverhill will have broadband,” Codling said, “and not just broadband but really good broadband.”

“WHY WREN IS STILL HERE”

Pam Sullivan, executive director of the Women’s Rural Entrepreneurial Network (WREN) in Bethlehem, said the non-profit supporting 120 entrepreneurs had already struggled before the pandemic.

Without high speed internet, she said, it could have folded.

“WREN had come out at a very difficult time. It had closed its doors in 2018 and was really looking at how it could become relevant again to the North Country,” Sullivan said. “Having the high speed internet was a game changer, which why WREN is still here. If we didn’t have the high speed internet, I think that would have probably been the last thing that would have put WREN out of business.”

That, in turn, helped WREN’s members — some living in remote areas — to come in, conduct business online, and maintain their revenue streams.

“[The internet] is very, very important for rural economic development,” Sullivan said.

“NOT ON MY WATCH”

Ed Shanshala, CEO of Ammonoosuc Community Health Services, said his organization relied on internet connectivity to meet patient needs during COVID.

ACHS stood up a telehealth service within 72 hours of the state of emergency declaration in 2020 and providers were allowed to bill Medicare and Medicaid patients for remote care.

Remote care proved valuable, particularly for those in the aging North Country who are physically or mentally incapable of accessing in-person care.

Encouraged, ACHS has expanded its telehealth efforts to better serve its clientele, with plans to pilot a remote blood pressure monitor, oximeter and EKG in 2024.

Fearing challenges to remote care, Shanshala urged federal officials to defend continued Medicare and Medicaid billing for telehealth services, saying, "They're not putting the toothpaste back in the toothpaste tube. Not on my watch."

Davidson, the broadband czar, expressed his support.

"It just underscores for us how important this is, this is life and death for people," Davidson said.

"ONCE IN A GENERATION"

Prior to the roundtable, the co-hosts went to a work site where New Hampshire Electric Co-op employees were putting up broadband lines.

It was a visible reminder of the work being done to connect tens of thousands of people across New Hampshire who still lack basic access to adequate internet.

"We got a chance to see them in action just down the road," Davidson said. "It was chilly. They were working hard. They were splicing fiber and this is the work that needs to get done for them to connect everybody in the country."

He said the nation's post-COVID broadband efforts were a generational moment on par with the building of the nation's highway, electric, water, and phone systems.

"It's a once in a generation moment of opportunity. Generations before us did really big things. They brought electricity and water to everybody in America. They built the interstate highway system," Davidson said. "This is our generation's big infrastructure moment. This is our chance to connect everyone in America with what they need to thrive in the modern digital economy."



Paul Hayes

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