

AFT-Wisconsin, Progress North, IBEW Local 953, Main Street Alliance, and Wisconsin Farmers Union: Teachers, farmers, activists, business owners call for rural broadband investment

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Wisconsin is struggling: for racial justice, dignity at work, a fair democracy, and our children's future. As farmers, teachers, parents, and small business owners, and as rural Wisconsinites, we are calling on our neighbors and elected officials to work with our communities to address the desperate lack of internet access in rural areas and small towns.

Forty-three percent of rural Wisconsinites lack high-speed internet access, a critical utility we all depend on: for small businesses and farms to connect with customers, families and citizens to participate in democracy, and most importantly, for teachers to safely conduct their classes and reach their students.

According to a June survey, nearly two-thirds of school districts in Wisconsin have areas that lack internet access, and over one-third can't furnish hotspots or wifi cards. Even those planning on operating 100 percent in person will need contingency plans for the inevitable spikes in cases and return to remote learning later in the year. These high need areas are nearly exclusively rural.

Patience won't solve this problem; investment will. This past decade, our neighbors in Minnesota have provided over five times the grant money for broadband that Wisconsin has. Required matching from providers effectively doubled those resources. That investment has closed the rural high-speed internet access gap in

Minnesota to 16 percent—almost three times better than Wisconsin.

The federal money that has come into our state to expand broadband access—\$1 billion through the Connect America fund—has been often gobbled up by the largest providers, monopolies with no motivation to serve marginal populations, and no improvements to show for the funding.

We have creative leaders who are ready to strengthen our own economies by hiring local, unionized, cooperative providers (which predominate in rural communities) to install broadband. It's up to the state and federal government to provide the investment and incentives, protect residents from corporate malfeasance in concentrated markets, and ensure the internet is allocated fairly as a public utility.

As you're taking time to learn about candidates this year, please find out if you are voting for a leader who will bring the needed resources to communities—not corporations. Our schools, small businesses, and farms—and our democracy itself—depend on it.

This opinion has been respectfully submitted by a newly formed coalition that includes AFT-Wisconsin, Progress North, IBEW Local 953, Main Street Alliance, and Wisconsin Farmers Union.