

WCA report finds big gaps in broadband coverage in rural areas

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A Wisconsin Counties Association report finds broadband is universal in cities and villages, but rural parts of the state have big gaps in coverage.

The research arm of WCA, Forward Analytics, released a report this week titled, “Broadband in Rural Wisconsin: Identifying Gaps, Highlighting Successes.”

The report cites the most recent data from the Federal Communications Commission that 25 percent of rural residents lack access to 25 megabits per second broadband, the speed which is now considered the standard. Wisconsin ranks worse than the national average and 35 other states.

Rural access in the Badger State to 25 Mbps broadband varies widely by county, according to the report. The highest levels of rural access are in the relatively small rural parts of urban counties, such as Kenosha, Racine, and Waukesha counties. However, in nine more sparsely populated counties — Ashland, Clark, Douglas, Iron, Marinette, Price, Richland, Rusk and Taylor — less than half of the rural population had broadband at that speed available in 2019.

“Without a doubt broadband access in all corners of our state is crucial for the success of Wisconsin. Over the past two decades, the growing importance of broadband for business, farming, school, and governments has been obvious,” said Forward Analytics Director Dale Knapp. “The COVID-19 pandemic has put an even brighter spotlight on this issue and re-emphasized its critical nature as we face a new normal.”

Report authors Knapp and researcher Jack Votava highlight Wisconsin's key successes in broadband infrastructure as well. Access levels at speeds of 10 Mbps or higher are better than the U.S. average — 93.6 percent of rural Wisconsin residents had access to those speeds vs. 91.3 percent nationally. In areas with 10 Mbps access, the strategy for achieving universal 25 Mbps access will involve upgrading current service rather than bringing new broadband to areas where it does not exist.

The Forward Analytics report illustrates that the state has also shown how a variety of technologies and strategies can be employed to provide broadband to rural populations from fiber to cable or DSL lines to wireless towers — or a blend of all three.

“Local governments can play a leadership role in solving the problem of adequate universal broadband,” said Knapp. “They are uniquely positioned to identify underserved areas, which is a critical first step in addressing the access issue.”

He added local governments can help connect local private providers to various state or federal grant programs, noting that successful broadband projects often require collaboration between multiple stakeholders.

Knapp told WisBusiness.com he thinks there's renewed interest from the state Legislature in doing more to make broadband more universally available.

“The state has provided significant amounts in broadband grants this fall. I don't know of anything in the pipeline,” he said. “That said, I think the big question for next year is whether there will be money in the budget to do more given that we are expecting this to be a difficult budget.”

See the release:

<https://www.forward-analytics.net/research/broadband-in-rural-wisconsin-identifying-gaps-highlighting-successes/>

See the report:

<https://www.forward-analytics.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2020-FA-Report-Broadband-in-Rural-Wisconsin.pdf>

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