

Eau Claire County to pilot high-speed internet program

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The state is helping Eau Claire County launch a pilot program to test SpaceX's Starlink, a constellation of low Earth orbit satellites that can provide high-speed internet in rural areas.

The pilot project will get high-speed internet to 50 rural homes and businesses. It is getting a \$27,500 grant from WEDC as well as funding from a group of health care providers, including Marshfield Clinic, Mayo Clinic and Hospital Sisters Health System. Chippewa Valley Technical College and PESI Online Learning also contributed.

The partnership between the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. and the county comes as Gov. Tony Evers continues to underscore the importance of expanding broadband.

The pandemic has demonstrated that reliable, high-speed internet access is essential today for work, for school and to access healthcare, said WEDC Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes.

During the one-year pilot program, Eau Claire County residents will test how well the service performs for work, for accessing health care and for attending online classes. What makes the Starlink system different from traditional satellite internet is that it uses satellites in a low orbit. This can reduce the service's latency — the delay between sending and receiving data, or the lag between talking and hearing someone respond.

By partnering with schools and health care systems, the county will be able to get a good idea of how the service works for different uses, said Dave Hayden, information systems director for Eau Claire County.

That's the hope of area health care providers who see access to broadband service as key to offering better access to healthcare.

"Telehealth has the potential to remove some of the barriers and disparities of healthcare by eliminating the barrier of travel," said Chris Meyer, Marshfield Clinic Health System's director of virtual care and telehealth. Meyer also sits on Evers' Task Force on Broadband Access.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Marshfield Clinic Health System had about 15,000 telehealth visits per year. Six months into the pandemic, the system had about 165,000 telehealth visits.

SpaceX's Starlink is delivering initial beta service both domestically and internationally and will continue expansion to near-global coverage in 2021. For this pilot, the county with assistance from WEDC and others is paying the \$499 equipment fee and \$99 a month service fee for each participating household for one year.

Eau Claire Energy Cooperative, Eau Claire Economic Development Corporation and Royal Credit Union also donated to the project.

The Starlink initiative is the most recent pilot program supported by WEDC to help expand broadband service throughout the state. Earlier this year, the state announced a \$100,000 pilot program with the Northland Pines School District to test the use of tethered drones to deliver Wi-Fi service for students.