Written Testimony of
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Chairman Pryor, Senator Wicker, Members of the Committee

I bring to you today the voices of rural community leaders. These are the people who are engines of vibrancy across the American landscape. They are strong, hopeful people and they can make a little support go a very long way.

When we met Kristin Fake, a sole proprietor in tourism-dependent Akeley, Minnesota, it was a leap of faith for her to come to the workshop hosted by the University of Minnesota Extension Service, one of our partners in our broadband work.   Like so many, she couldn't imagine how technology might benefit her home staging business. At the workshop she quickly discovered that her clients were being misdirected by Google maps, how keywords drive inquiries, and how she might use a smart phone to dramatically improve her customer service. Her annual sales now are much higher than before she took the class and products she advertises on Facebook often are purchased before she even gets them displayed in her shop. Kristin is poised to take her business to a new level as Akeley continues to recover from a very tough economic patch.

Kristin went from not being able to imagine how technology might be helpful to her business to creating demand for products and services that the marketplace hadn't yet imagined. Empowering people through technology also was the focus of our partnership with the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.

Janice Gale, director of the Leech Lake Band's Temporary Employment Program, long had seen the digital challenges that her neighbors and workers faced in seeking even temporary employment. She quickly put to work the resources and relationships available through our network of partners to teach online job search and work skills, and to expand the availability of computers on the reservation. A computer lab at the Boys and Girls Club, for example, attracts 250 students each month.

Refurbished computers, training and subscriptions for kids and families were distributed through Head Start. Temporary workers who participate in the digital literacy program upgrade their skills and qualify for higher pay. Temporary Employment Program student workers help learners in the computer labs, which is a great benefit to both trainers and learners. Janice, in her quietly passionate way, grins when she tells how many participants have been inspired to pursue their GED.

Multiply Kristin Fake and Janice Gale times hundreds. And the stories continue to roll in from communities all across rural Minnesota, where adoption is not just a policy imperative, but a community imperative.

Blandin Foundation is a private foundation that has the unique privilege of working exclusively with rural communities in Minnesota.   Based in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, we are one of only a handful of foundations nationwide so focused on rural communities, and we are the state's largest foundation located in a rural community.

What we have learned over 75 years is that thriving communities are built on hard work. On the hard work of leadership, inclusion, reaching across differences and building lasting connections.   On commitments, and on belonging—that indelible sense of place that is home.

That's the fertile soil that healthy communities grow in. And that's what Blandin Foundation is about— helping people imagine, lead and grow vibrant, resilient, rural communities.

From our experience, realizing the promise of the Internet is as much about investing in human capacity as it about investing in technological capacity. Maybe more.

After a career in the Foreign Service, I became Blandin Foundation's first-ever public policy director in 2003. When I looked out over the rural landscape, one issue that stood out as having great potential to help rural communities thrive into the new century: access to high-speed Internet, and the capability to take advantage of its many social and economic benefits.

Today the digital divide remains far too real for rural America. And especially real for those who face other types of barriers—poverty, language, isolation. The work of bringing the promise of the Internet to all Americans clearly is not done.

We believed in 2003, and still do today, that

1. Broadband is the indispensable infrastructure of the 21st century, and

2. Rural communities need broadband access, *and* the ability to use it, in order to thrive – and even survive – in an ever more globalized world.

To this end, Blandin Foundation has invested in a body of work focused on strengthening community broadband leadership and adoption. One of these projects, the Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities Initiative (MIRC), had the support of the American people through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, which connected our work to national goals.

Blandin Foundation administered MIRC on behalf of a coalition of 19 statewide partners— regional development commissions, state workforce and education institutions, etc.—and 11 rural demonstration communities. Our work partially was funded through the federal Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP), one of 44 sustainable adoption grants awarded nationwide.

MIRC began in 2010 and was largely completed by the end of 2012, putting to work $4.8 million of federal grant dollars, $1.8 million in matching funds and countless hours of work by community leaders to create a network of resources and support to rural Minnesota communities, business owners, students, health care facilities, local governments, the poor and un- and under-employed.

Our aims were ambitious: to support and encourage vibrant rural economies through broadband adoption as a strategy for job growth and wealth creation; and to accelerate broadband adoption.

Specifically, we sought to:

- Support and encourage vibrant rural economies through broadband adoption as a strategy for job growth and wealth creation.

- Increase "culture of use" of broadband services.

- Improve efficiency and effectiveness of digital literacy training service delivery.

- Accelerate broadband adoption by two percent over its statistically anticipated growth (increasing broadband subscribers by 38,556 more than could otherwise be expected).

In sum, helping rural communities keep up globally was our real task. Thanks to the federal funding we received we were able to take on an ambitious, comprehensive, multi-sector effort that wove together work at the local community level, all the way up to state-wide engagement.

MIRC set measurable goals. All were accomplished or exceeded:

Outcome	Goal	Accomplished
New households subscribed to broadband	38,000 *(2 percent above statistically anticipated growth)*	40,496
Number of public-access computer sites	0	60
Number of people who participate in at least 16 hrs of training/ education	3,640	9,000
Refitted and licensed computers distributed to first-time computer owners	1,000	2,067
Number of people reached through outreach and awareness	160,000	250,000

Overall, broadband adoption in participating communities grew close to 15% faster than in the rest of rural Minnesota. And communities that reported the highest rates of participation in MIRC activities also experienced the highest rates of broadband subscription growth.

These data show that, without a doubt, rural communities across Minnesota moved the needle on project outcomes, especially with underserved residents and businesses.

Dr. Jack Geller of the EDA Center at University of Minnesota-Crookston and lead researcher for MIRC, concluded in his final evaluation that, "It's hard not to connect the MIRC project…as a contributor to Minnesota's leading position in rural broadband adoption."

Persuaded by the effectiveness and impact of these efforts, and mindful of the critical role that broadband access and adoption play in the economic and social life of rural places, Blandin Foundation's Board of Trustees has committed an additional $1.5 million to continue to support broadband adoption efforts in rural Minnesota in 2013 and 2014.

Our Approach to the Challenge of Broadband Adoption

Blandin Foundation's community-based efforts take many forms, driven by the unique needs and interests of participating communities. Our strategies include:

- Offering individuals training in computer literacy and knowledge worker career development strategies.

- Providing technical assistance and customized training to small businesses and entrepreneurs.

- Distributing refurbished computers to low-income, rural Minnesota residents.

- Partnering with Internet service providers to offer subsidized subscriptions to connect those computers to the Internet.

- Helping communities identify their unique goals and providing the technical assistance and grant funding needed to turn those goals into accomplishments.

At the heart of our approach is high-touch, multi-sector, sustained community engagement. This includes community-wide visioning and goal setting and a community-driven grant proposal solicitation process to generate project ideas and community commitment upfront.

To help drive home the recognition that broadband is a necessary but not sufficient element of economic development and community vitality, MIRC used indicators developed by the New York-based Intelligent Community Forum (ICF) to help communities baseline and measure their competitiveness in the broadband economy. These indicators include: ensuring broadband infrastructure, developing a "knowledge work force", supporting innovation, redressing the digital divide, and effectively using marketing and advocacy to tell the community's technology story.

Community leaders used the ICF indicators to identify and select community projects that best fit local needs and focus their efforts on short term achievable goals that would have meaningful impact over the long term. More than 100 community-identified projects have been funded so far.   Here are a few examples:

Ensuring the Availability and Use of Broadband Infrastructure
Thief River Falls launched "Computers for Our Community," a collaboration between local broadband providers and MIRC partner PCs for People. Over 18 months, the project

delivered 126 refurbished computers, 91 reduced-rate broadband subscriptions, and nine multi-week digital literacy courses for low-income families. Most (84%) recipients continued their broadband subscriptions even after subsidies ended.

Lac qui Parle County created a mobile computer lab that brings broadband access to one of Minnesota's most sparsely populated regions. A local partner testified: "The Computer Commuter … connects patrons to people and places they had no idea they could connect to!"

Fostering Innovation
An immigrant resource center in *Winona* launched digital literacy training in Hmong and Spanish for more than 60 recent immigrants. The project "... built bridges among cultures and organizations" and led to the realization that a "connected city helps everyone."

A consortium of nine school districts in *Stevens County* developed a broadband-based system to provide specialized distance learning services for students with disabilities. Their takeaways: "[Realization] that the world is able to communicate and work cooperatively using technology; and, that the world is not limited to Stevens County."

Benton County added new computers in libraries, schools, and senior housing and created 13 new Wi-Fi access points in a variety of businesses and community sites, including an elder care facility. According to the county's economic director, "Our elected officials now see the importance of broadband for economic development and community vitality."

Deleting the Digital Divide
MIRC partner and nonprofit *PCs for People*, in addition to surpassing their goal to refurbish and redistribute 1,000 computers to low-income rural households, opened affiliate storefronts in four rural Minnesota communities in each corner of the state. Said one computer recipient: "I've gone back to school; I have two kids and now I don't have to go to the library and find a sitter to do research… I can stay home with my kids." When expressing her appreciation for receiving a computer and internet connection, another recipient explained that the computer was going to be a Christmas present for her child; receiving it meant that she wouldn't have to choose between buying gifts or feeding her kids over the Christmas break.

Building a Knowledge Workforce
Cook County opened a computer lab as part of a higher education distance learning partnership. During the project's 18 months, the site provided 21 training sessions attended by 185 people in this remote community with a population of 1,351. The lab continues to be

available to all community residents and is used as a public Internet-access site and distance learning resource. The partnership offers credit courses from more than 25 institutions of higher learning.

Marketing and Advocacy (The capacity to advocate for change within the community and market themselves to the world)

A local-access television station in *Itasca County* upgraded its software, hardware and web site interface to live stream and archive public meetings online. The move has improved access to these meetings for permanent and seasonal residents. Several other communities enhanced their government and business online presence, including *Windom* in far southwest Minnesota, which planned, launched and continues to maintain the "Finding Windom" community portal web presence.

Here is a sampling of some the voices of rural Minnesotans who participated in MIRC reflecting on the impact of these broadband adoption efforts on their overall community vitality:

"We've turned a corner and become a community that's actually growing and thriving instead of stagnant and dying, with what we've learned from the MIRC program."
>   Kristin Fake, owner, Just a Stage/Second Stage home staging, Akeley, MN

"This project has permanently changed the way we think and the way we work together."
>   Della Schmidt, Winona Area Chamber of Commerce, Winona, MN

"These technology classes have encouraged our Hispanic and Somali immigrants to interact, really for the first time."
>   Fatima Said, Project FINE, Winona, MN

"This effort has helped us develop wonderful community connections. We have reached out to our whole community."
>   Keri Bergeston, Principal, Dawson/Boyd (MN) High School

"MIRC efforts have really contributed to creating a 'Culture of Use' amongst tribal members. Overall, MIRC has helped the Leech Lake Reservation increase the economic vitality of our community. Tribal community member are more familiar with the tools of broadband and the economic opportunities that are available."

Mike Jones, Chief of Staff to Tribal Chair, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Walker, MN

"This framework brings people together that have not always worked together – technology advocates, workforce, social service agencies, and economic development professionals."

Danna MacKenzie, Cook County (MN) IT Director

"The families in our community will see benefits for many years to come as a result of everyone's hard work and dedication on this project."

Kristen Lee, Independent School District #381, Two Harbors, MN

Lessons Learned: Key Elements of Successful Adoption Efforts

I.   Communities know best.
Involve citizens directly in articulating their community's broadband adoption and utilization goals to catalyze long-term engagement needed to increase adoption.

II.   Local Leadership matters.
Help local broadband champions get and use skills to frame issue, build and sustain relationships and mobilize people to build a community's capacity to achieve its broadband goals.

III.   Broadband is not an end in itself.
It is a means to the higher ends of increased economic vitality and improved quality of life. Framing it this way helps.

IV.   High touch outreach works.
Effective recruitment strategies are intra-community, hyper local, and personalized. Change follows relationship lines.

V.   Peers make great teachers.
Peer-based learning formats are popular, low cost and easily sustainable tools to build a community's technological savvy.

VI.   Cross-community communication is key.
Signage, local media support, and aligned social media are effective low-cost ways to spur and sustain energy and excitement for community projects.

VII.   Engage tomorrow's leaders today.
Recognize and authentically engage the talents of young people. This generation of leaders brings energy and sustainability to any community initiative.

VIII.   Connect the economic dots.
Framing increased sustainable broadband use as a necessary but not sufficient ingredient in a "whole systems" approach to strengthen community vitality can help communities see and leverage the connection between the technology and benefits to community life.

IX.   Have patience.
This work takes time. Look for and celebrate early and easy "wins," but think long term and build capacity and energy for the long haul. Money and other resources follow vision and commitment.

Conclusions and Policy Implications
In service to the work of this committee and anyone working to strengthen rural communities, Blandin Foundation commends to you these key conclusions that we have drawn from our experience:

- Broadband access alone is not enough: without concerted, community-based efforts to ensure that *all* citizens are able to take advantage of the Internet, the digital divide will continue to grow and to undermine America's promise as a democracy where equal opportunity is available to all.

- Community-based broadband literacy and market development efforts can and do help ensure that all Americans can participate fully in our nation's economy and civic and cultural life.

- Eliminating the digital divide is an urgent challenge that must be part of our national agenda. States and communities need the federal government and its resources as a partner in this work.

- Federal investment in broadband access and adoption made available to Minnesota through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act have made a significant positive difference to rural Minnesota communities' ability to be globally competitive and ensure a high quality of life for their residents.

- NTIA has been a very helpful partner in our efforts to bring to rural Minnesota communities the full benefits of the broadband-enabled economy. NTIA's "Broadband Adoption Toolkit," released in May of this year, is an especially powerful tool for shining a light on best practices, and making them available to community champions across the country.

In sum, access to broadband is key: Evidence abounds that high-speed Internet access has economic benefits (positive impact on median household income, employment, and business growth).

But so is adoption. According to the report, "Broadband's Contribution to Economic Health in Rural Areas: A Causal Analysis," by B. Whitacre, S. Strover, and R. Gallardo (March 26, 2013), "Non-metro counties with high levels of broadband adoption in 2010 had significantly higher growth in median household income between 2001 and 2010 compared to counties that had similar characteristics in the 1990s but were not as successful at adopting broadband."

This point was eloquently echoed in a recent edition of "The Daily Yonder," published on the web by the Center for Rural Strategies, a non-profit media organization based in Whitesburg, Kentucky, and Knoxville, Tennessee.

> "While most government broadband policies have traditionally focused exclusively on providing infrastructure, there is a case to be made for focusing on demand. ... Investments in people, education and training are essential to achieve meaningful use of the Internet."

On behalf of Blandin Foundation, our partners, and the people of rural Minnesota and rural America who work at broadband adoption every day, it is our honor to share our work with you and others. I trust that we have demonstrated how, in rural communities especially, support for broadband adoption can be stretched a very long way.