

! Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities !

– Key outcomes of an innovative  
rural broadband initiative



## ! A legacy of partnership !

In 2009, on behalf of a diverse group of partners, Blandin Foundation submitted an application to the U.S. Department of Commerce for funding from the Broadband Technology Opportunity Program. The application was successful, and project work began in 2010. By the end of 2012, \$4.8 million in grant dollars and \$1.8 million in matching funds had been put to work to create a network of resources and support for rural Minnesota individuals and communities.

Target outcomes included:

- ! Increased use of broadband services.
- ! Increased efficiency and effectiveness of digital literacy training.
- ! Increased economic vitality in rural Minnesota communities.

### MIRC Demonstration Communities



- Cook County • Benton County • Grand Rapids Area
- Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe • Stevens County
- Thief River Falls • Upper MN Valley RDC • Willmar
- Windom • Winona • Worthington

### Statewide Partners

- ! Blandin Foundation
- ! Intelligent Community Forum
- ! MN DEED Workforce Centers
- ! MN Learning Commons
- ! MN Renewable Energy Marketplace
- ! PCs for People
- ! Regional Development Commissions
- ! University of MN – Crookston
- ! University of MN Extension

## Intelligent communities in action

At the beginning and end of the MIRC project, the 11 rural Minnesota “demonstration communities” were individually evaluated to determine their competitiveness in the broadband economy.

Overall, the communities demonstrated a 9.4 percent improvement in their scores. The greatest improvement was seen in marketing and advocacy, followed by digital inclusion, broadband, knowledge workforce, and innovation.

During the MIRC project, community leaders in the 11 demonstration communities used the intelligent community indicators to identify and select community projects that best fit local needs. In addition, the indicators helped focus their efforts on achievable, short-term goals that would have meaningful impact over the long term. The results were inspiring.



**Thief River Falls** launched a program called Computers for Our Community. Over 18 months, the project delivered 126 refurbished computers, 91 reduced-rate broadband subscriptions, and 9 multi-week digital literacy courses to low-income families. Eighty percent of families reported that they continued their subscriptions when the program ended.



**Lac qui Parle County** created a mobile computer lab that brings broadband access to one of Minnesota’s most sparsely populated regions. Called the Computer Commuter, the service provides no-cost computer training and assistance to residents and local businesses especially in the communities of Bellingham, Boyd, Dawson, Madison, Marietta and Nassau.



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.



A consortium of 9 school districts in **Stevens County** developed a broadband-based system to provide specialized distance learning services for students with disabilities.



**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.





In addition to surpassing their goal to refurbish and redistribute 1,000 computers to low-income households, PCs for People opened affiliate store fronts in **four rural Minnesota communities.**



**The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe** incorporated digital literacy training into an existing temporary employment program, providing 437 band members with online resources to strengthen skills and find jobs. The band also expanded a computer lab at the Leech Lake Boys and Girls Club, which doubled the number of student visits to 250 per month.



**Cook County** opened a computer lab as part of a higher education distance learning partnership. So far, the site has provided 21 training sessions that were attended by 185 people. Going forward, the lab will be available to all community residents as a free Internet access point.



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 seasonal and full-time residents alike.



Several communities enhanced the online presence of government and business, including **Windom** in far southwest Minnesota, which planned and launched a community portal called Finding Windom.



It is not hard to connect the MIRC project ... as a contributor to Minnesota's leading position in rural broadband adoption.

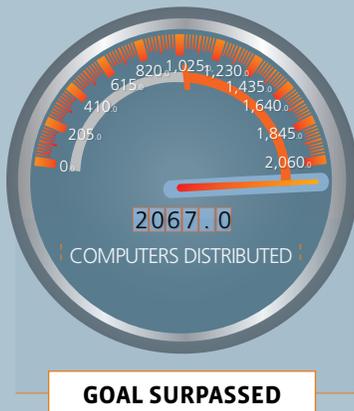
**Dr. Jack Geller**  
University of Minnesota-Crookston MIRC project evaluator

## What it all adds up to: Intervention works!

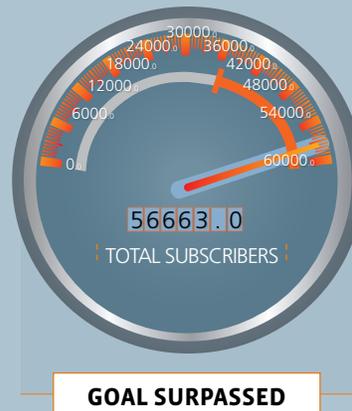
One of MIRC's key goals was to introduce rural Minnesotans to online tools that help them plug into the benefits of broadband. The MIRC partners reached that goal, especially for underserved residents and businesses.

ACTIVITY	GOAL	ACTUAL PERFORMANCE
Number of people reached through outreach and awareness	160,000	250,000
New households subscribed to broadband	38,000* *2 percent above statistically anticipated growth	56,663
Number of people who participate in at least 16 hrs of training/education	3,640	9,000
Number of small businesses reached and trained	8,000	8,625
Refitted and licensed computers distributed to first-time computer owners	1,000	2,067
Number of public-access computer sites	0	60

**PCs for People**  
2,067 distributed



**Total Rural Minnesota Broadband Subscribers:**  
38,000



## ! MIRC Funding Summary !

CATEGORY	BTOP FEDERAL GRANT	MIRC PARTNER MATCH	TOTAL
Statewide Partner grants	\$ 2,506,700	\$ 308,384	\$ 2,815,084
Demonstration and other community grants	\$ 1,398,000	\$ 1,297,526	\$ 2,695,526
Contractors	\$ 480,089	\$ 78,194	\$ 558,284
Administration and organizing consultants	\$ 473,429	\$ 149,321	\$ 622,750
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 4,858,219</b>	<b>\$ 1,833,427</b>	<b>\$ 6,691,646</b>

**Tekne Award – In November 2012, the Minnesota High-Tech Association awarded the MIRC coalition with the 2012 Tekne Award for Innovative Collaboration of the Year. Tekne judges noted that the collaboration had significantly impacted broadband adoption in Minnesota.**



## ! Strengthening community connections !

*"It seems as though communities impacted by this project felt a rejuvenated sense of community, because there were so many people rallying to get these projects done for their school, community, or organization."*

-- **Jacki Anderson, Upper MN Valley Regional Development Commission**

*"Our elected officials now see the importance of broadband for economic development and community vitality."*

-- **Nancy Hoffman, Benton County Economic Development Director**

*"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, Akeley**

*"These technology classes have encouraged our Hispanic and Somali immigrants to interact, really for the first time."*

-- **Fatima Said, Project FINE, Winona**

*The Digital Presence course basically gets you acclimated to online marketing and learning how to make it work for you."*

-- **Susan Reiter, Coffee Choices, Jackson**

*"This effort has helped us develop wonderful community connections. We have reached out to our whole community."*

-- **Keri Bergeston, Principal, Dawson/Boyd High School**

*"My customers are couples planning weddings, so I need my website updated and fresh, and to be found using mobile devices. The students' work on my site and Google Map location was great."*

-- **Donna Henry, Henry Catering, Foley**

*"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 IT director**

*"I see that this is just the beginning; the hard work is ahead of us."*

-- **Cook county resident**

## ! Lessons learned !

### **Communities know best.**

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

### **Local leadership matters.**

Help local broadband champions get and use skills to frame issues, build and sustain relationships, and mobilize people to build a community's capacity to achieve its broadband goals. Train community leaders to use participatory facilitation skills. Effective meeting facilitation can make a big difference in keeping folks coming back to the planning and implementation table.

### **Broadband is not an end in itself.**

Broadband is a means to the bigger picture of increased economic vitality and improved quality of life.

### **Outreach works.**

Change follows relationship lines. Effective recruitment strategies for technologically-challenged small businesses and for historically marginalized populations are intra-community, hyper-local, high-touch, and personalized.

### **Peers make great teachers.**

Peer-based learning formats that encourage local businesses to share practices, questions, and experiments are a popular, low-cost, and easily sustainable tool to build a community's technological savvy.

### **Cross-community communication is key.**

Signage, local media support, and online social media are effective, low-cost ways to spur and sustain energy and excitement for community projects.

### **Engage tomorrow's leaders today.**

Recognize and authentically engage the talents of young people. This next generation of leaders brings energy and sustainability to any community initiative. Youth can serve as co-trainers, technology mentors, and partners in computer refurbishment projects. They can also use their video and other social media skills to promote their communities.

### **Connect the economic dots.**

Framing broadband use as a necessary ingredient in the whole-picture approach to community vitality can help communities see and leverage the connection between technology and benefits to community life. This framework can also help community leaders see how workforce, infrastructure, inclusivity, innovation, and marketing/advocacy are mutually interdependent aspects of community vitality.

### **Have patience.**

The work takes time. Look for and celebrate early and easy wins along the way, but think about the long term and build capacity and energy for the long haul. Money and other resources follow vision and commitment.

! For more information !

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