The Story of the Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities Initiative:

Why? What? So What?

"Gaining access to the Internet is fast becoming a prerequisite for participating in civic and economic life."

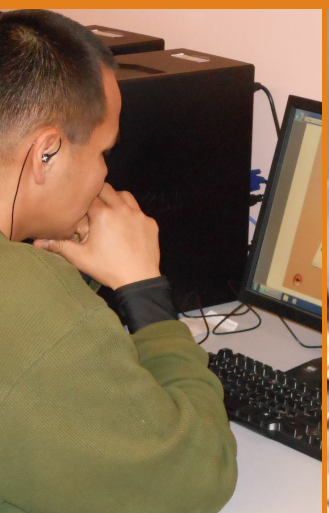
~ Jamahal King

"I see this is just the beginning: the hard work is ahead of us."

~ Cook county resident

"This project has permanently changed the way we think and the way we work together."

~ Della Schmidt





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Acknowledgements

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Bernadine Joselyn
September, 2013

Reflections on Blandin Foundation's Role

It was a dark and stormy night....

Actually, there are many moments in time that could be identified as the beginning of the beginning of the creation story of what came to be the Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities Initiative. In attempting to document the "story of MIRC," I begin with the premise that the full story will never be told. The relationships and ideas unleashed by the collaboration that emerged under the MIRC rubric continue to unfold in the world, and the seeds of this energy continue to find fertile soil in the imagination and dedication of rural Minnesotans who love their communities and dream of a prosperous future for those who will come after us.

The story of MIRC is a story of emergence. In retrospect, I see that we had no precise roadmap – only a dream and committed partners for the journey.

The purpose of this narrative is to shine a light on the significant mileposts of the journey and, in so doing, share highlights of what was accomplished and lessons learned along the way with others who aspire to change their communities for the better.

And so, I will begin not with the "dark and stormy night" tale of the alarming digital divide between the "haves" and the "have nots," nor the challenges of main street businesses struggling to compete with globally marketed big box retailers, but rather with the bright morning of May 11, 2010 when a group of (for the most part) then strangers from all corners of Minnesota showed up at Sugar Lake Lodge in Itasca County in response to an invitation from Blandin Foundation to figure out how we might together accomplish what we could not accomplish alone for and with the rural communities we love.

Our team of Blandin Foundation staff and consultants welcoming arrivals at the registration desk that morning were only slightly less clueless about what our proposed collaboration would end up looking like than the 49 travelers venturing in through the lodge's front door. I recall especially the sense of irony I experienced watching many of them poke futilely at their phones, irritated by the poor cell coverage at what otherwise is a showcase resort in the foundation's home community. Were we naïve to think our scraggly band of do-gooders could really make a difference for the rural communities we sought to serve?

Sure, we had made promises to our funders at the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) about the outputs and outcomes we would achieve with the federal stimulus dollars awarded to the foundation to improve "sustainable broadband adoption" in rural Minnesota. We had recruited community leaders and institutional partners. We had created an agenda for our two days together and even assembled a multi-tabbed "MIRC Partner Handbook" that outlined numerous policies and procedures we were proposing as a kind of "playbook" to guide our work together. But in fact, we had only the vaguest of notions of what our imagined collaboration actually would look like on the ground.

That sense of not knowing, of co-creation of an emergent set of relationships and procedures, showed up in how our invited partners experienced the two-day kick-off. It felt chaotic. It felt confusing. It felt... overwhelming. Such big aspirations! So many players and moving parts! So many resources... money, yes, but more importantly passion, energy, talent and dedication.

But the details of what our collaboration might look like were still vague. We were to be "fog sculptors" that day. How were we going to maximize the opportunities of yet-to-be-discovered synergies and partnerships and create and adhere to accountability systems of reporting, monitoring and assessment, while avoiding the redundancy, wheel-spinning and frustration that can result from unaligned action and lack of clear focus? How would we create the "Goldilocks" formula of "just-enough" structure and control needed to unleash – but also guide – the collective energy and talent in the room?

Communities are great examples of what John Bryson, my professor at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, describes as a "no-one-in-charge world" in which command-and-control processes fail us.[1] Since MIRC's inaugural Kick-Off meeting I have been introduced to three different frameworks for thinking about collective action and change that map nicely over the path our collaboration has taken from that morning to this morning of reflection, three years later.

These frameworks, or patterns, with their concomitant vocabularies, have helped me better understand and appreciate the emergent path we forged through the often daunting underbrush of uncertainty that we navigated together. Our way would have been surer and less unsettling if I had had these mental models in my head from the beginning.

What these models or ways of seeing and understanding share in common is the recognition that human systems are living systems.

The "living systems" world view is based on phenomena we see everywhere in nature that also apply to human systems like collaborations and communities.

Here are some of the qualities of living systems that we have found important to recognize and honor in creating a partnership capable of catalyzing and supporting community-led change efforts that last[2]:

- A living system accepts only its own solutions – we support those things we are part of creating.
- In nature, a living system participates in the development of its neighbor – an isolated system is doomed.
- Nature is in constant change (without "change management").
- Nature seeks diversity. Diversity increases our chance of survival (aka prosperity, vibrancy, etc.).
- Experimentation opens up to what is possible here and now. Nature is not intent on finding perfect solutions, but workable solutions.
- A living system cannot be steered or controlled – it can only be teased, nudged or titillated to see things differently.
- Who we are together is always different and more than who we are alone. Our range of creative expression increases as we join with others.
- Nature is self-organizing. Self-organization can lead to emergence of results or impacts that could not be predicted and that create totally new properties and qualities or something totally new and surprising. Human beings are capable of self-organizing around a shared purpose, given the right conditions.

Seeing our project as a living system, rather than a wire diagram "machine" over which we, at the foundation, had levers of control, was key to MIRC's success in creating conditions for sustainable change-making capacity in the communities where we worked. As Chamber of Commerce Executive Della Schmidt of Winona, Minnesota said, reflecting on her experience as a MIRC partner, "This project has permanently changed the way we think and the way we work together."

The three models or frameworks that, in retrospect, illustrate well the approach we adopted in administering MIRC, include Collective Impact, Keystone Institutions and Walking the "Chaordic Path" between Chaos and Order. Each is premised upon the living systems world view and detailed below.

1 Leadership for the Common Good: Tackling Public Problems in a Shared-Power World (Jossey-Bass US Non-Franchise... by Barbara C. Crosby and John M. Bryson (Jan 25, 2005).

2 Adapted from the "Community Engagement through the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter Workbook, Meadowlark Institute, 2013.

Collective Impact

First introduced to the field of Philanthropy in 2011 by authors John Kania and Mark Kramer, collective impact initiatives are distinct from other types of collaborations in that they "involve a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants."[3] The centralized infrastructure component of this model is referred to as a "Backbone Organization." Kania and Kramer identify six common activities of Backbone Organizations to support and facilitate collective impact work:

1. Guide vision and strategy
2. Support aligned activities
3. Establish shared measurement practices
4. Build public will
5. Advance policy
6. Mobilize funding

In this model, Blandin Foundation fulfilled the role of the backbone organization for MIRC. Ticking down this list of backbone activities, it is clear that the foundation performed each and all of them – from the initiative's conception through implementation to completion, with the policy component advanced via the foundation's Broadband Strategy Board and my role on the Governor's Broadband Task Force as the voice for the perspectives of rural communities.

Keystone Institutions

A second way I have found helpful in seeing and understanding the foundation's role in administering MIRC is through the lens of the work of venture capitalists Victor W. Hwang and Greg Horowitt, authors of *The Rainforest: The Secret to Building the Next Silicon Valley*[4]. In their book, the authors describe a new field they have dubbed "the analysis and fostering of innovation systems" that draws from a range of disciplines as surprisingly diverse as neuroscience, economics and sociology.

Noting the growing conviction among economic development professionals that innovation is the key to economic growth, the authors offer a framework for fostering innovation that diagrams the "biology of innovation" (notice the reference here to natural systems). In this context, "rainforest" is a metaphor for "environments that encourage disconnected people to self-organize into greater forms of biological life that support the social and cultural fabric essential to innovation."

According to Hwang and Horowitt, "keystone institutions" are one of the ingredients necessary for creating and sustaining "innovation rainforests." Like keystone species in a natural ecosystem, keystone institutions in an innovation ecosystem play the role of nurturing the social interactions that turn the basic ingredients of capital, labor and ideas into vibrant, sustainable innovation systems that can enable entrepreneurs, as well as cities and regions, to attain new heights of innovation and productivity. The authors assert that, "Where innovation is concerned, markets are largely inefficient. ... Public institutions have a much bigger role to play than typically thought."[5] Enter Blandin. We played the role of keystone institution in the rainforest innovation system of MIRC by seeking to embody the following keystone roles and attributes:

3 John Kania and Mark Kramer (Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter, 2011).

4 The Rainforest: The Secret to Building the Next Silicon Valley.

5 Ibid. page 21.

Integrative: *having the ability to convene people who might otherwise be strangers and encourage the best of their collaborative instincts to overcome natural distrust.*

Influential: *having the ability to appeal to people's long-term interests and non-economic motivations. Keystones can help people strive for higher aspirations and create a bandwagon effect.*

Impactful: *having the ability to make things happen.*

In our keystone role we used our convening capacity, created conditions for people to discover and articulate shared goals and aspirations, and applied various forms of capital (financial, technical, and reputational) in support of aligned activities at the community, regional and state-wide level.

In addition to the three attributes listed above, Hwang and Horowitt name a handful of other factors that keystone institutions should be attentive to in order for the "biology of human innovation ecosystems" to truly thrive. These include diversity, trust, connecting self-interest to the common good, and social norms that promote rapid collaboration and experimentation. Blandin Foundation sought to foster each of these factors in the practices and procedures we designed and employed in our role as the keystone institution in the rainforest of MIRC. Above all, we sought to be a bridge across the social, economic and geographic distances that hinder innovation.

Now ten years into my work at the foundation I am more aware than ever of the power and importance of language. "Framing" is one of the key skills we teach through the foundation's community leadership program. In hindsight, one of the key lessons I have learned from MIRC is that the "broadband" label is not very helpful. In essence, MIRC is about prosperity and learning and social and economic justice for all. In a word, it is about creating and sustaining conditions for innovation. Broadband is the means not the end. That is why I think Hwang and Horowitt's model of "innovation ecosystems" is so apt to understanding what MIRC was all about.

Walking the "Chaordic Path" between Chaos and Order

The third model or pattern that has helped inform the Foundation's role in designing and supporting MIRC comes from the principles and practices of the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter (AoH). The Art of Hosting can be understood as "an approach to leadership that scales up from the personal to the systemic using personal practice, dialogue, facilitation and the co-creation of innovation to address complex challenges."[6]

In the foundation's years of experience working with rural Minnesota communities, we've found that rarely is money the most important ingredient for community change. Rather, the most important ingredients are much more intangible. They are ideas and hope... what sociologists and psychologists call "efficacy." In our experience, AoH patterns and practices – and the living systems world view in which they are embedded – are simple, yet powerful aids in helping communities build this muscle of efficacy.

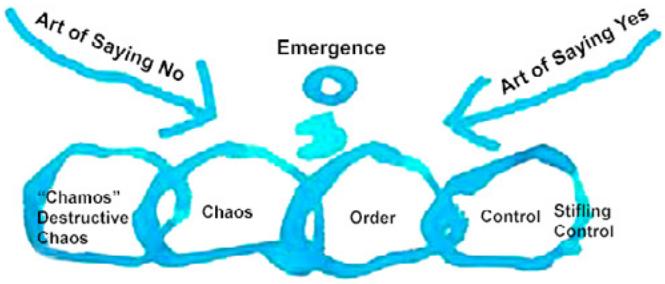
At its heart, AoH is based on the premise that *conversation* is the most generative of all practices. I think it is fair to say that every collective action ever undertaken by human beings began with a conversation. Certainly this was true for MIRC.

Foundational to AoH is the idea that the "wisdom is in the room." Not in outside experts. In Gandhi's famous words: *"We are the change we want to see in the world."*

6 Chris Corrigan created this "elevator speech" definition for AoH and shared it via the AoH listserve, May 8, 2013.

One of the core patterns used in AoH is the "Chaordic Path." First conceived of and named by Dee Hock, founder, president, and CEO emeritus of VISA International, and described in his book *Birth of the Chaordic Age*,[7] the Chaordic Path and "Chaordic Stepping Stones" that guide leaders along this path describe the "dance" between Chaos and Order that allows innovation to emerge.

Chaordic Path



Chaos – Order – Control are different states of being and experiencing. Many of us tend to feel safest in the state of order, or for some people, in control. Being out of control is scary if we are looking for predictability. If we have a mechanistic view of organizations, our tendency will be to stay within the realms of order and control, where things are predictable and stable – and where we produce *status quo* or *"more of the same"* – which in some cases is exactly what is needed (for example among pharmacists and air traffic controllers).[8]

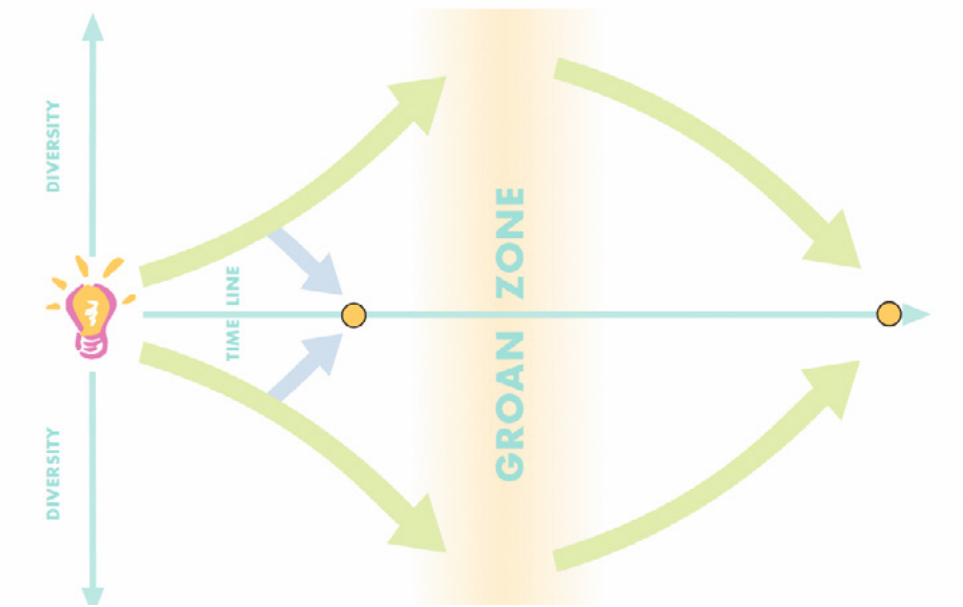
However, the world and times we live in are neither predictable nor stable. "More of the same" solutions can't always meet the challenges we face. This is certainly true for broadband access and adoption in rural communities! To uncover or discover *new solutions* we have to be willing to step closer to the randomness and disorder of chaos. Innovation and creativity are found in the space *between* chaos and order — the "chaordic path." At the edge of chaos is where life innovates – where things are not hard wired, but are flexible enough for new connections and solutions to occur. The concept of "walking the Chaordic Path" invites leaders to design and adopt structures and to use facilitation processes that access the collective wisdom of everyone, which can be, at times, a *messy* process until we reach new insight and clarity.

The "mess" of this chaordic approach to collective action was certainly palpable in room at Sugar Lake Lodge that May morning in 2010 as representatives from the nearly 30 MIRC partners first met to co-create the structures and principles that would guide our collective work going forward. As my colleagues and I stood before our to-be partners, we called on them to have the courage to stay in the dance of order and chaos long enough to support generative emergence that allows the new, collective intelligence and wise action processes to occur.

7 Birth of the Chaordic Age by Dee W. Hock and Visa International (Jan 1, 2000).

8 This description is drawn the "Community Engagement through the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter Workbook, Meadowlark Institute, 2013.

A second AoH model called "Divergence/Emergence/Convergence" helps us see, appreciate, and stay in the mess of not-knowing long enough for innovation to emerge. Each of these phases is different, but together they describe the path towards innovative and inclusive wise action.



The divergent phase is about embracing not-knowing. It is a time for generating alternatives, free-for-all open discussion, gathering diverse points of view and unpacking the problem or challenge being addressed. The divergent phase is non-linear and needs "chaos time." It is a time for gathering all voices and perspectives, a time for listening and staying open to new ways of seeing and thinking.

The convergent phase is goal oriented and focused, linear, structured and usually subject to time constraints. It is focused on getting results and may require quick decisions. It is the time for evaluating alternatives, summarizing key points, sorting ideas into categories and arriving at general conclusions.

The emergent phase, between the divergent and convergent, is fondly known in AoH lingo as the "groan zone." It is the phase where different ideas and needs are integrated. It may require us to stretch our own understanding to hold and include other points of view. It is called the groan zone because it may feel messy — an uncomfortable stretch — but it is also the phase where the new solution emerges.

Needless to say, there was a lot of groaning going on that May morning at Sugar Lake Lodge back in 2010. The need for our work was clear, we had a clear purpose and goals, but exactly *how* we were going to work together remained shrouded in fog and the uncertainty of not-knowing.

What follows in this report is an attempt to share some of the most salient details of what emerged, the convergence of our shared intent and the impact of what the MIRC team achieved together over the three-year life of the project. That said, it is clear to me looking both back and forward, that although MIRC is "over" – final reports to NTIA submitted, our MIRC NING site quiescent, our webinar series suspended and archived – MIRC's impacts live on and the collaborations it unleashed continue to flourish. That is the true testament to MIRC – as noted in the epigrams with which I began, there is plenty of hard work still ahead, and how our partners work and work together has been permanently changed.

Bernadine Joselyn
Director, Public Policy & Engagement
Blandin Foundation
May 6, 2013

Summary

The Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities (MIRC) project was a multi-sector, comprehensive approach to rural Minnesota broadband adoption that targeted un- and under-employed workers, non-adopters, low income residents, small businesses, local governments and critical services providers. The MIRC coalition, comprised of 19 statewide and regional partners and 11 demonstration communities, formed in summer 2009. Blandin Foundation applied to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) for a federal stimulus grant on behalf of MIRC in August 2009 – Minnesota's only application with statewide focus. In March 2010 NTIA awarded MIRC a $4.8 million Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA) grant through the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) – a program of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act – one of only 44 SBA grants awarded nationwide. The project was designed to reach each of Minnesota's 80 rural counties through education, training, technical assistance, and by removing barriers to broadband adoption. Project partners promised $1.5 million in matching funds, for a total project budget of nearly $6.4 million. The grant was completed in February, 2013. Blandin Foundation served as fiscal agent for the federal grant and provided overall MIRC project management.

Grounded in our mission of strengthening rural Minnesota communities, Blandin's goals for this work were to support and encourage rural Minnesota communities' efforts to compete and thrive in the broadband economy by focusing on community-based work in sustainable broadband adoption, job growth and wealth creation.

MIRC set measurable outputs to reach the target outcomes. All seven goals were accomplished or exceeded.

ACTIVITY	GOAL	ACTUAL PERFORMANCE
Number of people reached through outreach and awareness	160,000	250,000
New households subscribed to broadband	38,000*	56,663
	*2 percent above statistically anticipated growth	
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

In addition, nearly 100 community-designed and administered projects were funded to address communication technology goals and opportunities identified by MIRC's eleven demonstration communities.[9]

But as every good program officer knows, Outputs are not the same as Outcomes. What meaning can we make from all of this activity? What's it all add up to? To quote Albert Einstein's wise adage, taped to my office door, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."
That said, our project assessment reports do include a bunch of "countable" stuff that I think "counts" as part of the answer to the "So What?" question posed in this report's title:

9 See Appendix for a complete descriptive matrix of community projects.

- Data examining the growth in broadband adoption over the project period suggest that broadband adoption growth in participating communities grew an average of 12 percent faster than in the rest of rural Minnesota.
- Those communities that reported the highest broadband growth rates also reported the highest percentage of awareness of broadband activities by their residents.
- Those communities that reported the highest rates of participation [in MIRC activities] also experienced the highest rates of broadband subscription growth.
- Those communities that experienced the fastest growth [in broadband adoption] during the project also reported higher percentages of awareness and participation in MIRC activities.
- Such evidence allows us to conclude that community-based broadband literacy and market development efforts can and do make a difference.

On November 1, 2012 the Minnesota High Tech Association recognized Blandin Foundation on behalf of MIRC, with its 2012 Tekne Award in the category of Innovative Collaboration of the Year for the project's achievements.

Responding to the Need: Making the Case for MIRC

On February 17, 2009, President Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), commonly referred to as the Stimulus or The Recovery Act. ARRA was an economic stimulus package designed to respond to the Great Recession of the late 2000s. Its primary objective was to save and create jobs almost immediately. The Act funded direct spending in education, health, energy, and infrastructure, including $7.2 billion to expand access to broadband services in the United States. Of those funds, the Act provided $4.7 billion to the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to support the deployment of broadband infrastructure, enhance and expand public computer centers, develop and maintain a nationwide public map of broadband service capability and availability, and encourage sustainable adoption of broadband service. Sustainable Broadband Adoption projects were to "focus on increasing broadband Internet usage and adoption, including among vulnerable populations where broadband technology traditionally has been underutilized."[10]

Here in Minnesota, as across the country, the signing of the act was big news. In particular, its provisions for funding sustainable broadband adoption got our attention. Recognizing the importance of telecommunications technology to rural economies, Blandin Foundation had been working with the rural communities we serve on broadband adoption since December 2002, when we launched our initial Broadband Initiative. In partnership with leadership across Minnesota, our goals for this work were to:

- Increase awareness about the value of broadband telecommunications use and services
- Increase business and residential use of broadband in rural communities
- Increase public and private investment in rural broadband capacity

These goals mapped well against those laid out by NTIA for its BTOP program. Inquiries around the state led us to understand that no other organization or agency seemed to be lining up to apply for any of the federal funds now available for this work. Aware of the barriers many rural communities experience in applying for and managing large federal grants, and eager to see at least some of these federal dollars put to work on behalf of the rural communities we serve, we decided to leverage our experience with proven broadband adoption programs, our relationships, and our grant management expertise to apply for BTOP funds.

10 http://www2.ntia.doc.gov/about.

We put out a call for partners. We were looking for organizations with staff capacity for regional or local implementation, matching funds, ideas and enthusiasm. On April 21, 2009 the foundation convened an initial gathering that resulted in a coalition of organizational partners that covered every region of rural Minnesota and created a statewide technical assistance footprint. And so the collaboration that would become MIRC was born.

In the application we crafted for submission to NTIA's BTOP program, we made the case for the need we sought to address. While broadband technology was being embraced by Minnesota citizens and businesses, the gap between rural and metro area residents and businesses was significant. In part due to demographic and socio-economic differences, as well as differential access and availability to broadband, there was a concern that this gap between rural and metro adoption rates would not be closed without some type of intervention.

Here's how we described the need for this work in our 2009 BTOP application:

> Rural MN communities are used to competing. Within traditional economic development methods, they compete with one another for the big box retailer, manufacturing plant, or distribution center. In today's global economy ... rural communities in Minnesota live, work and compete alongside the people in Beijing or Calcutta. They need to act strategically on the "live anywhere, do anything" opportunities available through the proliferation of broadband access. Rural communities must aggressively pursue economic viability offered through creativity and innovation, information and knowledge, digital inclusion, and marketing and advocacy.
>
> Like rural communities throughout the country, rural Minnesota communities are facing economic stress. ... According to a June 2009 report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, there is a significant (20 percent) gap between rural and urban home broadband adoption rates. While the rates of adoption have been increasing over time, this gap has remained consistent since 2006. ... The gap ... [is] often compounded by demographic characteristics of rural MN communities, including an aging population, lower per capita income, and lower educational attainment. In fact, the Pew study lists factors that negatively correlate with home broadband adoption to be (in order of importance): Having less than a high school degree, Age 65 or over, living in rural America, and having a high school degree. Analysis of the Pew study by Patchwork Nation (patchworknation.com) illustrates that 3 of the 5 community types with the lowest broadband adoption rates (Emptying Nests, Service Worker Centers, Tractor Country) comprise a majority Minnesota's rural counties.
>
> In a 2009 statewide study conducted by the University of Minnesota Crookston, a sample of Minnesota businesses found that in Minnesota, 10.3 percent of rural Minnesota businesses are not connected to the Internet. An additional 4.3 percent are still using dial-up speeds. Eighty-two percent (82 percent) of those offline businesses operate within the retail, food/accommodation/tourism and other small sectors. Eighty-four percent (84 percent) of those offline businesses have nine or fewer employees. Large percentages of the offline businesses are located in three economic development regions: southwest/south central, north central/west central, and northeast. Most of them (80 percent) have market areas within 100 miles of their location. These small businesses are the heart of the rural Minnesota economy. The viability of their businesses requires a move to online practices. Technical assistance and training is highly desired by rural Minnesota businesses. In the same study, 53.2 percent said that they would use more Internet in their business with the availability of technical assistance.

Reflecting on this Needs Statement three years later, I'm struck that thinking about broadband access and adoption in a regional or even national context borders on the irresponsible. It's a global economy after all, and helping rural communities keep up globally is our real task.

Akamai Technologies Inc.'s *Fourth Quarter, 2012 State of the Internet Report*, which tracks worldwide use of the Internet including connection speeds, network connectivity and availability, really punctuates this point. It shows that the U.S. ranks only 8th internationally in terms of average connection speed (13th in terms of average peek connection speed) and 8th in terms of adoption.

According to Ann Treacy who flagged and analyzed this report for the Blandin on Broadband blog, Minnesota is not in the top ten among US states in any metric. (http://wp.me/p3if7-1OP)

Commenting on this report in an email, MIRC program evaluator and University of Minnesota Crookston EDA Center Director Jack Geller captured the urgency of our task: "Yes, while [Minnesota's] rural rates still surpass those of most other rural areas in other states, [our] rural population [represents] an ever-shrinking percentage of the state population .... And so, while the adoption rates in rural Minnesota are quite favorable to the rural areas in other states, Minnesota as a whole continues to drift downward. And .... don't even try to compare us internationally, as that comparison just gets embarrassing!"[11]

By late 2009 the BTOP sustainable broadband adoption proposal was submitted, and in the spring of 2010 we received a federal award of $4.8 million. On May 11-12, 2010 we convened our state partners and 11 demonstration communities for the first time to begin co-creating the Chaordic Path we would follow towards increased and sustainable broadband adoption among rural Minnesotan citizens, businesses, and communities.

Over those two days, the newly minted MIRC partners each took a turn in front of Ann Treacy's video camera talking about what "success would look like" for them three years down the road when the project wrapped up. Here's what some of them had to say back then at the beginning:

"Our goal with this project is to continue the dialog with our community and keep the momentum going around how we as a community can benefit from broadband. Through this opportunity we'll be able to broaden the circle of leadership locally on this issue and enable a broader group of people to define how the internet could be useful to them." –Danna MacKenzie, Cook County

"I believe the success for our organization in this project would be that we don't have to even think about broadband. To me, broadband is an important part of our community infrastructure. It should be as ubiquitous as your dial tone. You don't think if your phone is going to work. It works. When were successful, folks won't be thinking so much about what kind of broadband, it will be there, and we will be spending our time thinking about what to do with it." –John Shepard, Southwest Regional Development Commission.

"I think a successful project would result in a path to get at the underserved population in terms of broadband access." –Bob Voss, East Central Regional Development Commission

"As an economic developer, my goal for this project is all about creating businesses, attracting businesses and retaining businesses and making them better and more productive. Also, creating a strong work force and creating jobs, especially for those people who wouldn't have an opportunity to have computers or use the technology otherwise. And finally, marketing our community as an intelligent community, but to get there we have to be that intelligent community." –Nancy Hoffman, Benton County

"Intelligent Community" Indicators:
A Framework for Economic and Community Development

Nancy Hoffman had "intelligent community" on her lips and in her brain because she and the other partners had been hearing about this framework during our kick-off session. When crafting our grant application, we went looking for a container concept that was spacious and flexible enough for the ambitious "culture of use" movement we hoped MIRC would catalyze across rural Minnesota. Project consultant Bill Coleman introduced us to this framework, developed by the New York-based Intelligent Community Forum (ICF), as a way of thinking about economic and community developed, and we decided to adopt it for MIRC.

11 Personal email correspondence.

The ICF framework establishes five core community characteristics that can be measured and monitored: broadband connectivity, digital inclusion; knowledge workforce; innovation; and marketing and advocacy. ICF Founder and Director Robert Bell described "Intelligent Communities" this way in a January 2013 report to the foundation:

"Intelligent Communities are those which have – whether through crisis or foresight – come to understand the enormous challenges of the Broadband Economy, in which information and communications technology is transforming every aspect of the way we live, learn, create profits and participate in society. Based on this understanding, Intelligent Communities take conscious steps to create an economy capable of prospering in the 21st Century. They are not necessarily big cities or famous technology hubs. They are located in developing nations as well as industrialized zones, rural areas and suburbs as well as cities, the hinterland as well as the coast."[12]

Blandin worked with Robert Bell to adapt the ICF framework to provide meaningful evaluation of the readiness of the demonstration communities to use broadband and information technology for economic and social development. The resulting Intelligent Rural Community Indicators measured broadband penetration and costs, educational performance and attainment, digital inclusion efforts, innovation by business and government, and the communities' skills at marketing themselves to the world and advocating for change within the community.[13]

12 Page 6, Partners in Progress: The final report on the MIRC Demonstration Communities 2010-2012, Robert Bell, Intelligent Community Forum, January 31,2013.

13 Ibid., pp 10-11, for a more detailed discussion of the data gathered and measured for each of these indicators.

Over the summer and fall of 2010, each of the demonstration communities participated in gathering baseline data for the adapted ICF indicators. This initial assessment scored the communities on a 100 point scale, with 20 points allocated to each of five indicators. The first round of data collection showed a wide range of strengths and weaknesses, both within and across communities. We then invited the demonstration communities to propose projects that addressed challenges and opportunities uncovered by the ICF assessment – with the requirement that at least one community project address the digital inclusion parameter.

With coaching from the MIRC project team and technical assistance from Robert Bell, during the first and second quarters of 2012 community teams conducted a second, follow-up assessment of the ICF indicators. The results: over the 18-month period, the demonstration communities had moved the needle on all indictors. Data showed a 9.4 percent average improvement in community scores, ranging from a high of 16 percent in the marketing and advocacy indicator to a low of 4 percent positive change for innovation.

Marketing and Advocacy. This was the area of greatest weakness in the initial assessment. It was also the metric offering an opportunity for the greatest improvement in the shortest time and at the least expense. Demonstration communities were quick to seize on this advantage, and improved their average score by 26 percent.

Digital Inclusion. In 2010, the communities scored well on basic Internet access and at an average level for public access. The high cost of broadband in many communities presented a challenge to inclusion, however. Higher prices for broadband are typically driven by low population density, which raises costs, and limited real competition, which reduces incentives for lower prices. No change in basic broadband pricing was measured in 2012, but through their MIRC activities the communities created over 60 new public access sites and expanded programs for the digitally excluded, raising their average score on this indicator by 14 percent.

Broadband Connectivity. Over the 18 months under comparison, all of the demonstration communities grew their rate of broadband adoption at an average rate of 12 percent, compared with a rural Minnesota statewide average of 10.3 percent for the same period, thus shrinking this rural-urban gap. In both 2010 and 2012, all of the demonstration communities scored well in broadband compared with national rates of adoption in comparable rural areas. And although the gap between rural and urban adoption shrank, the average penetration in the communities in 2012 was 67.1 percent, still below the rural statewide average of 70.6 percent.

Knowledge Workforce. In 2010, the percentage of residents with undergraduate or graduate degrees in the demonstration communities was low compared with national averages, but the percentage with community college degrees significantly outpaced the rest of the U.S. population. This may reflect the relative scarcity of undergraduate and graduate campuses, as well as the traditional employment demand of employers for skills useful in resource extraction and manufacturing in the region in past decades. However, public schools in the participating communities were well equipped with information technology. The average student-to-PC ratio in 2012 was 2.81 to 1, compared with 3 to 1 in 2010 and to the 2006 U.S. average of 3.8 to 1. More than 90 percent of schools provided in-house training for their teaching staffs. From 2010 to 2012, the average score of the communities on this metric improved by 5 percent, which is meaningful given the long and major effort required to change the educational outcomes of a community.

Innovation. In 2010, the rate of new business starts in the demonstration communities was low compared to both U.S. averages and a reasonable estimate of rural averages. As a result, the average age of businesses in the area was nearly 14 years, whereas businesses do most of their job creation in the first five years of life. Start-up capital was available only in the form of public-sector grants and loans, for the most part, though many of the communities did not appear to be aware of the availability of such programs. Changing any of these dynamics is a long and difficult process, and the communities on average showed small progress over the two years measured, producing only a 4 percent average improvement.

Our community partners told us that overall they found the indicators helpful in understanding broadband as a necessary but not sufficient component of an integrated economic and community development framework. The indicators also helped communities focus their efforts on goals achievable in the short term while building readiness to tackle more ambitious goals important to their long-term competitiveness and digital readiness. Reported (then) Benton County Economic Development Director Nancy Hoffman, "Our elected officials now see the importance of broadband for economic development and community vitality."

From the foundation's perspective, the ICF indicators measured what they were intended to measure, were well-calibrated to reveal meaningful differences in readiness and performance, and reinforced collaborative, multi-sector approaches to community and economic development.

Tracking Broadband Adoption Rates and Partner Activities

The goals for the federal stimulus programs that funded MIRC were focused as much on increasing broadband subscriptions and job creation as they were on community vitality. Thus, our project team had to create and put into place monitoring and tracking systems responsive to those expectations. In hindsight, one of the smartest choices we made early on in our overall program design was to partner with Dr. Jack Geller and his staff at the EDA Center at the University of Minnesota Crookston. Jack led the design and implementation of two additional overall project evaluation processes, one tracking broadband subscription rates, and one tracking the on-the-ground activities of each of the MIRC partners against outputs and outcomes identified in our original proposal to NTIA.

The following description of EDA's methodology for tracking broadband subscriptions and adoption is taken from the EDA Center's final MIRC evaluation report, submitted to Blandin Foundation in January 2013[14]:

> Utilizing telephone interviews, over 4,000 residents were surveyed across rural Minnesota to establish both a statewide baseline rate for rural Minnesota, as well as a baseline rate for each of the 11 MIRC demonstration communities. This design would allow us to not only examine change in broadband subscriptions and adoption rate from Spring 2010 ... to Fall 2012, ... but also provide us with the capacity to contrast the change across the rural MIRC communities with those across rural Minnesota statewide.

EDA's baseline adoption survey revealed a wide range of broadband adoption and utilization across the 11 MIRC demonstration communities at project outset, from a low of 48.8 percent (Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe) to a high of 69.2 percent (Winona). Collectively, the 11 were lagging behind the rest of rural Minnesota in the adoption of broadband (61.7 percent vs. 64 percent). According to the EDA evaluation team, the reasons for this were multiple, "including many of the MIRC communities having a disproportionately high percentage of elderly residents; some communities (particularly tribal communities) having a high poverty rate; while others such as Cook County, simply had limited access to broadband."[15]

By project end, however, this rural-urban gap had narrowed. According to the EDA report, "overall, the growth in broadband subscriptions throughout rural Minnesota grew at a pace of 10.31 percent during the MIRC project, increasing the overall adoption rate from 64 percent in 2010 to 70.6 percent toward the fall of 2012. However ... most of the MIRC communities ... increased their growth rate at a faster rate. In other words, while the MIRC communities began the project somewhat further behind the rest of rural Minnesota, their collective growth rate was close to 15 percent faster than the rest of rural Minnesota; thereby closing that gap somewhat."[16]

14 Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities Project Final Report, Prepared for the Blandin Foundation, Authored by: Jack M. Geller, Ph.D. & Eddie Walker, M.A. & M.S., January 25, 2013, pp. 2-4.

15 Ibid. p. 28.

16 Ibid. p. 29.

From the same report, here is the EDA's description of the system we designed and implemented for monitoring MIRC on-the-ground activities by all of the participating partners:[17]

> Providing NTIA accurate quarterly reports of progress was a primary responsibility of the project evaluation team. Accordingly, it was vital that the project evaluation team was able to monitor the monthly activity of each of the project partners. These are the organizations that provided much of the day-to-day interventions (e.g., workshops, training activities, consulting, computer acquisition and public awareness) as part of the MIRC strategy. This required the design of monthly activity reporting forms for each of the project partners. To accomplish this, discussions were held individually with each of the MIRC partnering organizations in May 2010 to review the proposed activities and goals for each of these organizations as designed in the project proposal. From these discussions a web-based reporting form was created for each organization to complete online and submit directly each month. In addition, a web-based set of dashboards were created that allowed project participants, partners and interested community members to track the activities of the partnering organizations and observe their efforts to reach the project goals as outlined in the proposal, which is included below and may be viewed online at www.edacenter.org/mirc-dashboard.php.
>
> Combined [with the ICF indicators], these tools allowed us to establish a very accurate baseline for all of the MIRC communities, in terms of their adoption rates, economies, measures of digital inclusion, and innovativeness. In addition, the methodology employed allowed us to monitor all of the activities each month by all MIRC partners involved in classes in digital literacy, procurement and distribution of computers, public awareness campaigns and technology consulting with local rural businesses. Taken together, the methodology gave us the tools to measure output, change, and attempt to attribute that change to the programmatic activities.
>
> Of note, the high adoption communities had the highest average ICF score of 68.6. The medium adoption communities had an average ICF score of 64.61. The low adoption communities had the lowest average ICF score of 61.4.[18]

An Overview of MIRC's Statewide Partners, their Roles and Accomplishments

The coalition of organizations that responded to our call for partners was to some degree unprecedented. In an era of shrinking public resources it has become trendy in Minnesota to hail the virtues of public-private partnerships, but the aspirational talk hasn't (yet) led to much "walking the talk." This is especially true of large systems – like state agencies – that often experience internal structural barriers to collaboration. In the case of MIRC, our call for partners with "mission fit" and some time, talent, and/or treasure to contribute resulted in a diverse collection of 19 partnering entities, from small, feisty, social justice-minded nonprofits, to large public institutions. In addition to Blandin Foundation, MIRC partners included the state agency in charge of employment and economic development; Minnesota's higher education institutions (University of Minnesota Crookston (UMC); University of Minnesota Extension (UME) and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MNSCU)); all nine of the Minnesota's rural-based Regional Development Commissions (RDCs); and two nonprofit organizations - PC's for People and Minnesota Renewable Energy Marketplace. The resulting coalition of organizational partners covered every region of rural Minnesota and created a statewide technical assistance footprint.

17 Ibid., p. 4.

18 Ibid., p. 29.

Project consultant Bill Coleman described the partnering process this way:

"The ability of Blandin staff to convene statewide project partners from the University of Minnesota, MN Department of Employment and Economic Development and MNSCU and create a project free of turf issues and full of collaboration is a testament to the Foundation's reputation as an honest broker and trusted partner. Attracting communities to partner with Blandin Foundation was extraordinarily easy with communities fully committed to participating in the project before many of the parameters and the depth of commitment required were known. Blandin Foundation's expertise in leadership, collaboration and rural communities made it the perfect organization to lead this effort across greater Minnesota."

What Bill is describing here is how the partnership's chaotic launch evolved into a sustainable ecosystem of collaboration. Through the lens of the *Rainforest model*, we see Blandin as the Keystone, bridging social, economic and geographic distances that hinder innovation.

Through the lens of the *Collective Impact model*, we see Blandin in the backbone role of building shared data collection systems, using our financial, technical, and reputational capital to align activities at the community, regional, and state-wide level.

And through the lens of Art of Hosting's *Divergence-Emergence-Convergence model*, we see Blandin using our convening capacity to create conditions for people to uncover and articulate shared goals and aspirations. The policies and procedures we created to collect data and monitor progress and the co-learning environments we hosted to share promising practices helped the project partners "walk the Chaordic Path" between Chaos and Order where innovation and collective action emerge.

The table below, based on data collected by Dr. Geller and his team at the UMC's EDA Center,[19] summarizes the accomplishments the state-wide partners achieved individually and together in the project's emergent environment.

MIRC Partner Organization	Accomplishments
PCs for People, a nonprofit organization with a mission of providing refurbished computers to low-income households	Secured, refurbished, and distributed 3028 computers – more than triple their goal of 1,000 – to income-qualifying families made up of a total of 5,876 people, including 3,184 school-aged children in at least 65 of Minnesota's 87 counties.
University of Minnesota Extension's Center for Community Vitality	Conducted 306 workshops in 18 communities within the demonstration communities and other rural areas. Exceeded its training goal of 2,000 by providing these trainings to 2,475 rural businesses, delivering more than 11,000 hours of digital training. Exceeded its goal of providing direct technical assistance to 60 rural businesses by providing this assistance to 196 businesses. Contacted 6,150 rural businesses via outreach, exceeding its goal of 6,000 outreach contacts.
Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), a state agency that works to "promote business recruitment, expansion, and retention; international trade; workforce development; and community development" through its regional workforce centers across the state	DEED exceeded its goal of reaching 2,700 learners across rural Minnesota with digital literacy training by providing a total of more than 14,000 hours of training to 2,957 learners and increasing computer access in its workforce centers by more than 8,900 hours. For MIRC, DEED developed new online, user-driven modular digital literacy curricula in English and Somali. New collaboration with Minnesota's Adult Basic Education program, which has incorporated the MIRC curricula into its portfolio of client services, was an unanticipated but sustainability-enhancing outcome.
Minnesota Renewable Energy Marketplace (MNREM), a not-for-profit organization with the goal of retaining, creating, and attracting a more educated and skilled workforce in rural Minnesota	MNREM's goal was to deliver at least 1,500 hours of training and/or technical assistance related to broadband-based technologies and services to rural renewable energy businesses. MNREM exceeded this goal, providing almost 1,700 hours of training to 2,212 learners. Collaboration with University of Minnesota Extension Service led to the development and piloting of a series of "social media breakfasts" that since have found local hosts and spread virally to other rural communities across the state. These peer-to-peer co-learning events help foster the conditions necessary for creating the "culture of use" at the heart of the MIRC model.
Minnesota Learning Commons (MLC), a collaboration project of MN Department of Education and higher education systems that provides free online resources for public education	MLC's goal was to create and deliver 32 times a new online 16 hour "Knowledge Worker" course to help unemployed, underemployed, and dislocated workers reenter the workforce. MLC nearly achieved this target, providing the course 30 times throughout the MIRC Project, offering over 3,500 hours of training that reached 220 learners. Designed to be both classroom based and user-driven online, the new curricula is freely available to all through MLC.
Regional Development Commissions (RDCs) provide technical assistance and administrative and facilitation support to the local units of government in their region.	Responsible for conducting media and outreach activities all across the state, the RDCs reached over 250,000 households through media events. RDC staff made presentations and convened groups, reaching over 4,800 individuals, and made over 400 referrals regarding resources available through MIRC.

Together, the MIRC partners provided more than 31,000 hours of training to individuals and businesses reaching

19 Ibid, pp 20-26.

close to 9,000 learners in the process. And although the RDCs had primary responsibility for public awareness campaigns and outreach, all MIRC partners collaborated on this effort. They used traditional print and electronic web-based new media to engage the public in the project and made presentations at community meetings of all kinds (chambers of commerce, Rotary Clubs, etc).

The *Blandin on Broadband* blog has been an important tool in the project's public awareness and outreach efforts. With over 183,000 views to date (now averaging 500-700 per week) and a total of over 2,450 posts, testimonials received on the *BoB* suggest it has become the "go to" information resource about broadband-related news in Minnesota.

- "Again and again, I want you to know how much I appreciate your blog....putting some of this complex stuff in almost-plain English!"
- "These wonderfully concise and informative reports are so helpful to those of us who need to stay informed, but can't make the trip to the cities. Thank you very much!"
- "Ann Treacy is ... a fantastic resource for broadband information in the State.... I wished Ann was in all 50 States!!!"

Site administrator and blogger Ann Treacy uses the site to amplify the voices and experiences of MIRC partners and participants, to track the progress of other broadband projects across the state, to provide consistent reporting on broadband-related discussions at the state capitol and the Governor's Task Force on Broadband, and to follow broadband policy developments at the national level. Ann makes heavy use of video to record and share the unfiltered voices of opinion makers and community activists, archiving much of this content on a dedicated YouTube channel. The "best of *BoB*" is published monthly in an e-newsletter with a readership of over 500. *BoB* content is reposted frequently by other new media outlets. Ann's diligent efforts have resulted in a rich archive of promising practices, policy debates and testimonials for practitioners and policy makers alike.

Given all of these resources and partners it was sometimes challenging to determine the most appropriate scale and scope for the foundation's role in the project's general public education and outreach efforts. That question quickly led to a deeper one: was our goal to build and "leave standing" a MIRC entity or MIRC anything once the grant period had ended? As the work unfolded, it became clear that the answer to that question was No. Rather, our partners were looking to us to help them align activities, to catalyze collaborative responses to the digital divide and to the promise of the Internet, and to enhance their own capacity to lead and support community change.

Internally this became the "ten percent rule," meaning, that we saw ninety percent of the messaging task to be by and about community efforts and stories; the remaining ten percent of the communication efforts related to "the whole." This was where the foundation would focus its communication efforts.

In hindsight, the descriptions of a "backbone Institution" from the Collective Impact model, and "keystone institution" from the Rainforest model are instructive in making these choices. But we came upon those models late in the game, and the ten percent rule was our own internal and intuitive formula for figuring this out.

One set of activities we embraced as part of the ten percent rule was hosting annual conferences that brought together broadband advocates from across the state to explore "what we could do together that we couldn't do alone" to help advance Minnesota's statewide broadband goals. We designed the conferences to showcase the good work being done in communities, to explore opportunities to collaborate across ARRA-funded projects in Minnesota, and to discuss policy issues important at the state and federal level. A common thread across all of these statewide events was to provide a forum for catalyzing, supporting and reinforcing the relationships so critical to change-making at all levels.

To this end we experimented in our conference planning with a variety of approaches, from traditional formats like keynote speakers and moderated practitioner panels to more innovative activities like learning stations,

"speed dating" introductions, video festivals featuring content created by and about MIRC partners, and Open Space, in which conference participants themselves determined the agenda based on their own interests and energy. From my project administrator perspective, Open Space proved to be an exceptionally rich and generative format because of its ability, so simply and elegantly, to uncover participant interests and priorities and enable collective thinking and acting on those priorities.

Showcasing student voices also has had a powerful and lasting impact on the practices and perspectives of conference participants. Student teams made presentations on 100 things to do with 100 Mgs, effective use of social media for community marketing to knowledge workers, and on the connectivity infrastructure "requirements" college graduates look for when making decisions about where they want to live and work.

In reflecting on the implications of these student perspectives and experiences, (now) North Hennepin Community College President John O'Brien labeled "kids today" "technology assumers" (as opposed to technology users), who "just assume there is a web-tone out there," (like when you pick up a telephone receiver and hear a dial-tone). The challenge for us adults, he opined, is to help our youth understand that the "web-tone" won't be ubiquitously available in rural America until and unless we work together to make it so.

One of the more whimsical and fun – if not necessarily enduring (or endearing) involved conference participants in co-creating "Minnesota's better with broadband!" a theme song for broadband advocates across the state. Under the inspired guidance of songwriter and performer Billy Kirsch who, together with his musician partner, improvised a melody for the brainstormed lyrics:

Chorus:

Border to border across the land
Minnesota's better with big broadband.
Building community, putting people to work,
Changing the world thanks to MIRC
(pause)
Minnesota's better with broadband!

Verses:

Educating our youth from Windom to Duluth
You can't get on the internet from a phone booth.
Dial-up's a pile up, toss the 56K
Bring on broadband it will pave the way.

Helping business gain presence on line
You gotta Google them, and see what you find.
Connect far-away places with nearby faces
You betcha – fer sure!

Comments from participants give a flavor of what the conference experience meant to them:

- I am always impressed by the welcoming warmth at your Broadband events. I come away with a true sense of people collaborating to make something BIG happen.
- We gained good insight into how youth view our community online and will apply that knowledge to improve what we are already doing. We picked up some good ideas of how we can foster telecommuting in our area. I learned some very specific process techniques from fellow demonstration communities that will be helpful in the future.
- Thank you. I was out of the loop on broadband. Now I am a champion.
- As a student, I learned how important high speed internet access is in rural areas of the United States.

On the Ground: the MIRC Communities in Action

MIRC was focused in 11 distinct geographies cross the state that served as living laboratories for the community-based strategies at the heart of MIRC's design. The eleven included four municipalities (Thief River Falls, Windom, Winona, and Worthington), five counties (Benton, Cook, Itasca, Kandiyohi, and Stevens), one economic development region (Upper Minnesota Valley), and one Native American reservation community (Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe).

These "demonstration communities" were selected based on a process that evaluated their need, geography, readiness and local leadership commitment. The last factor was by far the most important: in our experience, without a "local champion," community engagement work is not sustainable.

Taken together, the demonstration communities brought MIRC to every corner of rural Minnesota. This cross-section of cities, towns, counties and multi-county regions – with a total population of 250,000 people and population density ranging from 1,700 to 4 people per square mile – gave us the opportunity to test the impact of education, training, and outreach efforts within communities of varying population, sizes, and social and economic profiles. Further, the communities had a wide variety of telecommunications infrastructure and services, ranging from municipally-owned and operated networks to duopoly-served markets to legacy providers.

Participating Geographic Units: "Demonstration Communities"	Population/ Population density (2010 census)	Median household Income	Percent of population below Poverty Line	Percent of population with post-secondary degrees
Benton County (minus St. Cloud)	32,055 84 people per square mile	$51,159	13.4	19.5
Cook County	5,176 4 people per square mile	$49,496	9.1	33
Itasca County	45,058 16 people per square mile	$47,106	11.4	20.9
Kandiyohi County	42,239 15.5 people per square mile	$49,915	12.7	21
Stevens County	9,726 18 people per square mile	$47,712	14.3	23.6
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	10,660 675.4 inhabitants per square mile (Note: for Cass Lake)	$43,941	22.7	19.1
City of Thief River Falls	8,573 809.0 per square mile	$38,306	13.1	16
City of Windom	4,646 1,116.8 inhabitants per square mile	$37,152	16.6	17.8
City of Winona	27,592 1,464.5 inhabitants per square mile	$35,964	23.4	29.2
City of Worthington	12,764 1,739.0 inhabitants per square mile	$42,472	26.8	17.4
Upper Minnesota Valley Region (Big Stone, Chippewa, Lac qui Parle, Swift, and Yellow Medicine counties)	45,190	$46,401	10.9	16.4

At the heart of the MIRC effort was the idea that communities know best what they want and what they need. As a result, the projects in each community varied in number and scope, but in all cases responded to needs and priorities identified by teams whose members were recruited and led by change agent-champions-project coordinators who attracted us to their communities in the first place.

That said, it was important to us that each team represent the diversity of experience, perspectives, and affiliations of their community. Project consultants Bill Coleman and Karl Samp coached team leaders on how to reach beyond the "usual suspects" to ensure that multiple voices were represented in MIRC-related decision-making at the community level. Teams were coached to ask "Whose voice is missing?" This inclusive approach has had perhaps one of the most profound impacts on how communities "get stuff done" in general, not just on this project. In the words of Winona Area Chamber of Commerce's Della Schmidt,"This project has permanently changed the way we think and the way we act together."

Once teams were assembled, Bill and Karl led their groups through exercises designed to uncover and map the leading, learning and work styles of each of the members to help increase the efficacy, creativity and sustainability of their group processes.

Here's Karl's description of this work:

> One exercise, the Leadership Compass, helped members identify their individual leadership styles, and when mapped, the make-up of their overall team. In the report out process, members also indicated which community connections they possess to assist in the project. The exercise serves at least three purposes: 1)help steering committee members who have never worked together get to know each better in a fun, but practical activity; 2) provide some introspection to individual members and reflect on what skills and connections they bring to the effort; and 3) provide the steering committee a visual "map" of the collective strengths and gaps in the make-up of their team. This led to teams recruiting new members who possess a leadership style not present in their current team, leading to greater success in project implementation. In another exercise during the initial team meeting, team members used a worksheet we developed listing Key Systems in the community that should be present in the broader community planning meeting. Members, as a group, brainstorm who should be invited from that sector, and who from their group has the best relationship with them, so that when invited, key system representatives are most likely to attend.[20]

The demonstration communities each conducted as few as three or as many as 15 projects[21] that can be grouped roughly into three types:

- digital literacy training;
- increasing the sophistication of utilization of the internet by community organizations, government and businesses (such as adding more transactional and interactive tools to otherwise static websites and supporting efforts to engage the public in using those tools); and
- the purchase of new equipment to improve internet and computer access for un- and under-served community members (such as routers to improve wireless availability and computers and related equipment for hospitals and clinics, libraries, new public "hot-spots," schools).

Here's an illustrative description of just a few of the community projects, organized by the five ICF indicators:

Broadband

- Thief River Falls, in northwest Minnesota, launched "Computers for Our Community," a collaboration of local broadband providers and MIRC partner PCs for People that, over the project's 18 months, delivered reduced-rate broadband subscriptions, a refurbished computer and access to digital literacy courses 91 low-income families, 80 percent of whom reported they continued their subscriptions when the program ended.

Innovation

- Project FINE, an immigrant resource center in Winona, in southeast Minnesota, launched digital literacy training for recent immigrants. The courses provided instruction in immigrants' native languages, including Hmong and Spanish, to more than 60 people. The project coordinator reported, "This project helped build bridges among cultures and organizations in our area ... we realized that a connected city helps everyone."
- A consortium of nine school districts in far west-central Minnesota's Stevens County developed a broadband-based system to provide specialized distance learning services for students with disabilities. One of the community's biggest takeaways: "[Realization] that the world is able to communicate and work cooperatively using technology; and, that the world is not limited to Stevens County."

20 Personal email correspondence, May 20, 2013.

21 See Appendix for a complete matrix of all community-led projects.

Digital Inclusion

- In central Minnesota, Benton County added new computers in libraries, schools, senior housing and created 13 new Wi-Fi access points in a variety of businesses and community sites, including an elder care facility. As a result, the community boosted significantly the number of county residents who have access to the Internet and broadband-based services such as a robust, "smart home" technologies service for seniors to connect with family, health care providers and online content of interest. According to the county's economic director, "Our elected officials now see the importance of broadband for economic development and community vitality."
- In Itasca County, Kootasca Community Action, partnered with PCs for People to distribute computers to 193 households. One recipient reported: "I used [the computer and Internet subscription] to job search and actually got one." Another reported a "huge benefit." "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." Over 80 percent of participants have elected to retain their Internet subscription after the initial subscription subsidy expired.

Knowledge Workforce

- Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe in central Minnesota incorporated digital literacy training into an existing day labor temporary employment program, giving 437 band members the opportunity to build online job search and work skills. The band also expanded a computer lab at a Boys and Girls Club; as a result, the number of visits by school-age children doubled to 250 per month. In the words of the Band's project coordinator, "Broadband technology is providing our local workforce with access to education and training and connecting businesses with employees."
- Cook County, along the North Shore of Lake Superior in far northeast Minnesota, opened a computer lab as part of a higher education distance learning partnership. During the course of the project the site provided 21 training sessions attended by 185 people. Going forward, the lab will be available to all community residents as a public Internet-access location. According to the local project coordinator, "In addition to helping us maintain engagement, build leadership, and foster partnerships, we have also been able to build new community assets that will live beyond the grant period and provide access that would not have otherwise existed."

Marketing and Advocacy

- A local-access television station in north central Minnesota's Itasca County upgraded software, hardware and its web site interface to carry more public meetings online via streaming video. The move has improved access to these meetings for local residents as well as cabin-owners and other seasonal residents.

Beyond the specific projects, grantee reports hint at the broad and deep impact MIRC has had on community engagement efforts, community capacity and community culture more generally:

- We've turned a corner and become a community that's actually growing and thriving instead of stagnant and dying . . . The enthusiasm and energy that we've generated for the town is phenomenal. *Kristin Fake, owner, Just a Stage / Second Stage home staging, Akeley*
- Connections were made that ... will be sustained into [the] future. But the successes that are the most personally rewarding are the many stories ... about how the program ... made a difference in peoples' lives. *Kandiyohi/Willmar*
- MIRC efforts have really contributed to creating a 'Culture of Use' amongst tribal members. ... Overall, MIRC has helped Leech Lake increase the economic vitality of our community. ... Community members ... are more familiar with the tools of broadband and the economic opportunities that are available. *Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe*
- Two of our region's smallest towns have a footprint on the global web which is so exciting! Our local Public Television station is creating content that can be put online ... this is amazing stuff! *Upper Minnesota Valley RDC*
- MIRC is a life changing project for many individuals in the nine communities, without the ... belief that communities like Thief River Falls can do something like this it simply would not have happened without that faith. *Thief River Falls*

- This effort helped build bridges among cultures and organizations in the Winona area ... a "connected" city helps everyone. *Winona*

The diversity of MIRC communities well illustrates the adage that "if you've seen one rural community you have seen one rural community." Each community brought to the project a unique set of assets and challenges, history, culture and aspirations, and the diversity of their projects and efforts reflect these differences.

For the statewide conference held in the final months of MIRC, we challenged ourselves to find a way to honor the distinctive work of each demonstration community. We decided to compose for each a tribute in Haiku, because of the discipline required by this particular poetic form to uncover the essence of the thing. Taken together, the Haiku offer an impressionistic flavor of what we saw as the signature pulse of each community team:

Benton County
What's up in Foley?
Benton County Connected.
Teamwork. Thanks Nancy!

Worthington
Worthington gets smart.
Bioscience paves the way.
Inclusion is key!

Leech Lake
Boozhoo Leach Lake Band!
TEP -new skills new jobs.
Miigwech. Job well done!

Cook County
Far away no more.
Video, mobile, learning.
Cook soon up to speed.

Grand Rapids
New partnerships forged.
Grand Rapids is connecting.
Building momentum.

Kandiyohi County
Kandiyohi calls
Swedes, Hispanics, Somalis...
the world comes to them.

Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission
Broadband opens doors.
UMVRDC rocks.
Regionalism.

Thief River Falls
Providers engaged.
PCs for Community.
Thief River Tech Hub.

Windom
"Finding Windom" works!
BARC sparks opportunities.
Everyone succeeds.

Winona
Project Fine lifts up.
Hot spots connect visitors.
Winona wows 'em.

Stevens County
Hot spots in Stevens...
"Center of the Universe."
Broadband makes it so.

Summing up his own impressions of MIRC's impact at the community level, Bill Coleman concluded in a post on Blandin's Outpost blog:

"MIRC combined the well-resourced efforts of statewide partners with highly motivated and empowered community teams to create an environment where success was expected and positive results achieved. Community teams identified priorities and then proceeded to design and implement collaborative strategies in broadband access and use; these strategies are proving to be sustainable and are continuing to bring community benefits. Communities stretched their allocation of $100,000 farther than we could have imagined. Each dollar was treated as a precious asset with community leadership teams finding additional local resources to achieve high quality, low-cost results. Collaboration across organizations was almost a pre-condition for funding so that every investment had multiple users and high ROI. Our communities exceeded our expectations time and again with their energy and creativity."

Lessons Learned: Emerging Signature Practices for Whole Systems Change
One of the most important lessons we've learned from MIRC is how helpful it can be to talk about broadband not as an end in itself, but rather as indispensable infrastructure for achieving other community goals. Framing the issue this way helps folks understand the role that broadband plays in addressing those challenges that typically show up as community priorities, like attracting and retaining household supporting jobs, supporting entrepreneurs, ensuring access to affordable quality health care, and offering world class educational opportunities to students of all ages.

Our experience in Minnesota supports research results showing that economic growth follows telecommunications investment. However, we've also learned that investment in infrastructure is not enough.

"If you build it they will come" does not apply to broadband. Concerted, sustained cross-sector engagement at the community level is required to create the "culture of use" necessary to deliver on the full promise of digital literacy and global connectivity.

Even given the socioeconomic and demographic barriers to increasing broadband adoption encountered by the MIRC demonstration communities, it is our experience that programs designed to increase computer access and internet use for low-income populations can address these disparities. Recruiting these target populations to participate in offered programs must include a commitment to cultivating relationships, which can be challenging within existing business models.

We've also learned that the biggest impacts are achieved when decisions are made closest to home. It has been our experience that rural communities can achieve big results with relatively small of amounts of funding when that funding is locally controlled. Encouraging and resourcing community-based teams to set goals and develop plans to achieve them increases community impact.

During the three years that Blandin Foundation was serving as the backbone for MIRC, the foundation as a whole began paying more attention than ever before to the challenges of becoming a "learning organization." We began asking ourselves, "How can we 'bake' adaptive learning practices more organically into our work?" The Lessons Learned shared below are the pithy "harvest" from many reflective conversations over the past 36 months. To give a richer sense of how these lessons show up on main streets in the rural communities we seek to serve, I've illustrated them with selected comments from project partners.

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.

"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 Minnesota Valley RDC

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 and champions to use participatory facilitation skills; effective meeting facilitation can make a big difference in keeping folks coming back to the planning and implementation table.

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

–Nancy Hoffman, Benton County Economic Development Director

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 this work in these terms, or as a necessary but not sufficient condition for innovation, connectivity, and equal opportunity for all, or as a prerequisite for full participation in our democracy, is likely to be more successful than by calling out the technical infrastructure itself.

"In an era when digital access is an essential element of full participation in modern society, when digital technology can be the deciding factor between economic opportunity and isolation, between social change and increasing inequality, and between democratic participation and standing on the outside looking in, it is critical to the future of our country ... to ensure that everyone has high-speed ... access to an open Internet.

–Luis Ubinas, President, Ford Foundation

High-touch outreach works.

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

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

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.

"[The Digital presence course] basically gets you acclimated to it [online marketing], and learn how to make it work for you."
–Susan Reiter, Coffee Choices coffee shop, Jackson

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.

"This effort has helped us develop wonderful community connections. We have reached out to our whole community."
–Keri Bergeson, Principal, Dawson/Boyd High School

Engage tomorrow's leaders today.

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

"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

Connect the economic dots.

Framing increased sustainable broadband use a necessary but not sufficient ingredient in a "whole systems" approach to strengthening community vitality can help communities see and leverage the connection between technology and benefits to community life. The "whole picture" Intelligent Community framework for community and economic development used in MIRC can help community leaders see how workforce, infrastructure, inclusivity, innovation and marketing/advocacy are mutually interdependent aspects of community vitality.

"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

"The involvement of local citizens, government, business and non-profit groups working together to enhance the effort to make the community better by forming a partnership that shares the same goals, aspirations and hope for the future of the whole county."
–Michael Haynes, Stevens County Economic Development Director

Have patience.

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

The End is the Beginning....

"I see that this is just the beginning; the hard work is ahead of us."
–Cook county resident

As I pen the final words of this report I am sitting in the passenger seat while my husband drives us home through rural Wisconsin on roads built by public investments made decades ago. The internet connection here is very poor – the hot-spot he set up for us in the car with his cell phone just cut out. The "webtone" expected by "kids these days" has not yet been built here....

I am reminded that this work takes time. It is cumulative, and builds on the efforts of those who came before. And we gotta do it ourselves, "If not us, who?"

That was the core message I recently delivered to a group of broadband champions from five east central Minnesota counties that came together to answer the question, "What can we do together that we can't do alone?" Collectively, these counties remain among the most poorly served in our state. Their gathering is evidence of a welcome trend in community organizing for enhanced connectivity and improved utilization that we at Blandin have been encouraging – the regionalization of the conversation.

I told them:

> I'm honored to be here with you today because we share a commitment to leadership, to helping our communities create and claim futures that are resilient, vibrant—and connected. ....
>
> The kind of change and collaboration you have had the courage to imagine by calling this regional conversation will demand hard work and most of all, **sustained** work, to bring into the world.
>
> I bring you today a message of hope and encouragement that it **can** be done... in fact, it **is** being done in towns and regions all across our state.

In sum, we are not the first pioneers, and we are not alone. Change at scale takes time and tenacity, patience and endurance, hope and local leadership. MIRC is over, but the work started on that bright morning in May 2010 will carry on. In the interests of those who will come after us, we must seize this moment to build on the vision and hard work of those who have come before. Onward!

Appendix

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Benton County	Benton County	"Knowledge Community" website	A new website will market training opportunities, market Benton County as a "Knowledge Community", and post information regarding broadband access in the County.
Benton County	City of Foley	Foley Interactive Website/ Library Access to Computers	The new City of Foley website will encourage broadband usage by providing an efficient way to conduct city business. This new website, and services including online payments, auto pay, information about the utilities available, ordinances and notices, will benefit over 2,600 Foley residents and other area community members.
Benton County	Country Manor Campus	Enriching Lives	Enriching Lives will broaden the opportunities seniors have to communicate with family and friends, and explore new horizons available via web-based education, entertainment and daily life enrichment.
Benton County	Foley and Sauk Rapids-Rice High School	Questia	Questia is considered the world's largest online library. It will provide student logins, encouraging them to use the Internet for research, note-taking and writing purposes.
Benton County	Foley Community Education	Foley - Intelligent Rural Community at Home, Work and School	Foley Community Education will increase computer lab time and provide classes for students, businesses and community members to enhance their use of high-speed Internet, telecommuting opportunities and online research tools. Class offerings will range from what to look for when purchasing a computer and basic operating system skills, to classes on creating a resume.
Benton County	Foley High School FFA	Growing our Youth Through Connecting with Ag Community	Create a website for the school's Future Farmers of American (FFA) organization to have students interact with the local agricultural community and to develop a first year well water testing project with the rural community through the website.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Benton County	Foley Public Schools	Wireless Access Routers	Purchase and install wireless access routers within Foley Public Schools to be used by students, staff, ABE participants, Community Ed participants and other community residents as well as guests of the community.
Benton County	Independent Lifestyles, Inc.	Project BRAVE	Project BRAVE (Broadband, Resources And Vocational Exploration) will provide curriculum, utilization and training for computer and Internet access. Classes will be designed for individuals and school-age youth with disabilities who are seeking to learn computer and Internet skills to increase their independence in daily living and gain successful employment. Furthermore, community members as a whole will have the opportunity for education through Vocational Rehabilitation Services, and one-on-one training options for VRS/DEED credentialing.
Benton County	LA Home Care	Smart Home Technologies for the Elderly	Smart Home Technologies will allow aging members of the community to live longer at home with greater security and less social isolation.
Benton County	Maywood Group / New Frontier Services	Business Website Assistance Program	This program will offer an additional service that eliminates the constraints and gets small and new businesses started with a website and company email address through the "DoIt4Website" process.
Benton County	MIRC Steering Committee	Marketing	To market the MIRC programs through Economic Development with a new logo, poster campaign for WiFi sites and with WiFi window clings. Equipment was purchased to market over the Internet. Staff will also post "Community Assets" on Google Maps.
Benton County	MIRC Steering Committee	Routers	Create more "Hot Spots" throughout the county by assisting businesses and public places provide wireless Internet.
Benton County	MIRC Steering Committee	Business Events	Host a number of events to promote MIRC activities with the theme, "change or become obsolete."

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Benton County	New Frontier Services	What's Up in Foley Website	The new "What's up in Foley" community website will increase exposure to community events, information and opportunities. The website will also be used as a platform for other projects, specifically non-profit organizations, to communicate information at no charge, such as directory listings, program details, website links, events listing and more.
Benton County	Sauk Rapids-Rice Community Education	Sauk Rapids-Rice Prepares for 2020	Sauk Rapids-Rice Community Education will increase computer lab time for students and community members resulting in increased use of high-speed Internet and improve technology skills. Parents will be trained on how to use the School District's website.
Cook County	Boreal Access	Community Media Services	Community Media Services will put the necessary tools in place to produce, upload, and serve local media content, including video production, editing, and storage. This is part of a bigger vision to grow and support an online community access channel.
Cook County	Cook County Higher Education	Training for Broadband	Cook County Higher Education will create and equip a lab facility that can be used to host events that tout the benefits of broadband and educate the community about how to use its tools. Digital inclusion issues will be addressed along with the training needs for future knowledge workers.
Cook County	Cook County Historical Society	Online History Museum Catalog with Multi-media links	The Cook County Historical Society will acquire the equipment, software and general labor necessary to convert their collection database to be accessible through a searchable catalog on their website.
Cook County	Cook County Visitor's Bureau	Mobile Devices – Website Compatibility Conversion	To increase visitor traffic and overall usability, the Cook County Visitors Bureau will make their tourism-related sites mobile compatible.
Cook County	Grand Marais Public Library	Try Broadband at The Library	The Grand Marais Public Library will increase public access to broadband by adding four laptops and two e-readers to their available equipment.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Cook County	ISD #166	IP Video Streaming	ISD #166 will acquire the equipment to stream live video of events in one gymnasium.
Cook County	Sawtooth Mountain Clinic	Health Reaching Out	Sawtooth Medical Clinic will use patient scheduling and initial consultation processes as a starting point to use online web forms to gather patient information. They will also explore how they can leverage social media through a project that will use several online videos to deliver important, educational healthcare messages.
Cook County	WTIP	Eye to Eye (i2i) Video Project	The Eye to Eye Video project will allow local radio station, WTIP, to expand their use of online video.
Grand Rapids / Itasca County	Elder Circle	Senior E-literacy	Senior E-literacy will provide seniors in rural Itasca County access to broadband services through basic computer training, skilled service training specific to online banking, and follow-up support.
Grand Rapids / Itasca County	Grand Rapids Library	Shared Portable Computer Lab and Training	The Grand Rapids Library will provide computer hardware, software and training to expand the understanding, use and availability of broadband Internet.
Grand Rapids / Itasca County	Itasca Community Television	Public Meeting Streaming	Public Meeting Streaming will provide improved community access to government and community information, with hardware improvements that will allow for seamless delivery of video to online viewers, particularly those in rural parts of Itasca County, whom are not served by cable access.
Grand Rapids / Itasca County	Itasca County Family YMCA	YMCA WI-FI Access Project	The YMCA WI-FI Access Project will provide computer hardware, software and training to expand the understanding, use and availability of broadband Internet, targeting the senior citizen population utilizing the Bruce Bauer Senior Center.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Grand Rapids / Itasca County	KOOTASCA Community Action	Low-income Computer and Internet Connect	Low-income Computer and Internet Connect will provide a computer and a one-year broadband Internet subscription to a minimum of 20 low-income households in Itasca County. KOOTASCA will provide the maximum number of reliable units possible to households selected from a pool of applicants that meet income guidelines (below 150% of the federal poverty guideline for a family of four). KOOTASCA will establish a selection process that provides a preference for providing the units to households that both meet the income qualifications and also assist students, parents with students and/or job seekers. KOOTASCA will be encouraged to obtain reliable computers from PCs for People for use in this project. GREDA will provide KOOTASCA the first 25 computers at no cost through the Federal Grant Award by PCs for People. KOOTASCA will also conduct quarterly follow-up interviews with recipients to measure the effectiveness of the program for the term of this agreement.
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	Boys & Girls Clubs	Club Tech Center	Create a Club Tech Center through the purchase of computers and networking hardware, curriculum-specific hardware and software, and facility preparation. In addition to serving youth, the Center will provide computer and Internet access and support to community members.
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	Division of Resource Management	Tribal Natural Resources GIS Upgrade	The LLBO Division of Resource Management will upgrade the existing computer system to allow for the addition of GIS mapping capacity of tribal lands, improving the capacity of the Division and the Tribe as a whole. The new system will allow for more efficient applications of GIS software, and the resulting maps, geospatial information and other tools will be accessible to the public through the LLBO website.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	Environmental Division / Head Start	PCs for People	The LLBO Environmental Department will work with PCs for People to implement a computer recycling system for low-income band members. The goal is to provide desktop computers and an introduction to computers training course for community families associated within Leech Lake Head Start.
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe	Temporary Employment Program	Digital Literacy Project	The LLBO Temporary Employment Program will create computer labs in four community centers and provide computer and Internet training to LLBO members, focusing on those band members who participate in the Temporary Employment Program. These computers will be made available to tribal members for public access.
Stevens County/ Morris	Chokio Alberta Public School	Broadband Upgrade	Chokio Alberta Public School District 771 will increase its broadband speed from 3Mbps to 6Mbps and provide four additional Internet wireless routers on the Chokio campus by December 31, 2011.
Stevens County/ Morris	Hancock Public Library	Increase Broadband Access and Education	The Hancock Community Library will purchase one laptop computer and its associated support equipment for use within the Library. The laptop will be available to recognized community organizations at no cost for workshop and training purposes, when not being used by the Library. Atomic Learning software will be included on the laptop for online training purposes for the public and the library staff.
Stevens County/ Morris	Hancock Public School	Broadband Upgrade	Hancock Public School District 768 will increase its broadband speed from 3Mbps to 10Mbps.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Stevens County/ Morris	Midwest Special Education Cooperative	Online Speech Therapy	Midwest Special Education Cooperative will 1) provide Internet-based speech therapy and other special education services to students in nine West Central Minnesota Public School Systems (Browns Valley, Chokio-Alberta, Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley, Cyrus, Hancock, Herman-Norcross, Morris Area, West Central Area, and Wheaton) and 2) collect system use data (individual and grouped student achievement results, hours used, service delivered, etc.) to measure the effectiveness of this new service delivery model. The data will be used to establish the effectiveness and possible future uses of Internet delivery of special education services.
Stevens County/ Morris	Morris American Legion	Walter Trip Community Internet Center	The Walter Tripp American Legion Post 29 in Morris will become a community Internet center with public access computers, a community "Wi-Fi" hot spot and teleconferencing (large wide screen HD monitor, camera, etc.). The Walter Tripp Community Internet Center will be available to recognized community organizations at no cost for workshop and training purposes. The public access computers will be available during normal business hours and the Walter Tripp Community Internet Center will provide a location to "marshal" all of the community's mobile learning labs (multiple lap top computers with their associated support equipment such as printers, etc.) when the need arises to have access to multiple computers.
Stevens County/ Morris	Morris Area Chamber of Commerce	Chamber Service Improvements	The Morris Area Chamber of Commerce (MACC) will 1) add two computers and associated equipment to provide support for the Chamber's existing communication/information system and 2) provide coordination between various communities through online collaboration.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Stevens County/ Morris	Morris Area School District	Increase Broadband Service in Education	Provide wireless routers at various locations in the school building. Embracing rather than prohibiting individual student electronic devices enhances their learning experience.
Stevens County/ Morris	Morris Area Community Education	Mobile Laptop Lab	Morris Area Community Education (MACE) will purchase 10 laptop computers and associated support equipment (storage unit, printer, etc.) for its and the Morris Area School System's (MAS) use. These laptops will be available to recognized community organizations at no cost for workshop and training purposes, when not being used by MACE or MAS. Atomic Learning software will be included on some of the laptops for online training purposes for MACE and MAS staff and the public.
Stevens County/ Morris	Morris HRA	HRA Website	The Morris Housing and Redevelopment Authority (MHRA) will establish a website for the City of Morris Public Housing Program that provides all Morris Public Housing Program documents (applications, etc.) and up-to-date guidance and educational information for past, current, and prospective public housing tenants and other interested parties. MHRA will also provide the public with computer access for the Morris Public Housing Program.
Stevens County/ Morris	Morris HRA	Rental Housing Info	The Morris Housing and Redevelopment Authority (MHRA) will establish a website for the Morris Housing and Redevelopment Authority Rental Housing Licensing Program to provide up-to-date inspection results, guidance and educational information to past, current, and prospective tenants, landlords, and other interested parties. The website will also have online versions of all landlord/tenant Rental Housing Licensing Program documents (applications, etc.). MHRA will provide the public with computer access for the Morris Rental Housing Licensing Program.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Stevens County/ Morris	Morris Public Library	Library Laptop Lab	The Morris Public Library will purchase six laptop computers and associated equipment for use within the library. When not being used by the Library, these laptops will be available to recognized community organizations at no cost for workshop and training purposes. Atomic Learning software will be included on the laptops for online training purposes. In addition, a space and resources within the library will be provided to create a business and career work center.
Stevens County/ Morris	Resource Connections	County-wide Wireless Access Points	Resource Connections will permanently install at least one public access computer and one wireless router along with the associated software and support equipment for a community "wireless WI-FI hot spot" in each of the five incorporated cities of Stevens County. Resource Connections will provide a three-year Internet subscription to each of the five public access computers and wireless routers, which will be available to the general public at no cost.
Stevens County/ Morris	Stevens County Historical Society	Digital Conversion	Stevens County Historical Society (SCHS) will become a globally-connected resource by providing its collections and records on its website, including cemetery records and the 20,000+ photo collection and digital images of artifacts and archives. Wireless routers will be installed in the upper and lower meeting spaces and the lecture space at the Museum and a public access computer station for web access and training for staff and public use.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Stevens County/ Morris	Stevens Forward	Website Improvement Project	Stevens Forward will provide county-wide coordination involving public entity website development and updating throughout Stevens County. The websites will include at least one county government site, five city government sites, one chamber of commerce site, one county economic development organization site and one Resource Connections site.
Thief River Falls area	Inter-County Community Council	Computers for Our Community	Computers for Our Community' will use workforce programs to connect area youth to technology initiatives including computer refurbishment and computer/Internet training.
Thief River Falls area	Northland Community College	Technology Fairs	The Thief River Technology Expo will gather a variety of private sector technology vendors for multiple demonstrations and classes on broadband technology and its applications.
Thief River Falls area	Thief River Falls Chamber of Commerce	Technology Connection Center	The Thief River Falls Technology Connection Center will be a space where businesses and the general public can easily have access to high-speed Internet, computers and training classes.
Upper Minnesota Valley Region[22]	Big Stone County	Public Internet Access Project	The Public Internet Access Project will provide online access to government information and resources including forms, county highway project status, and GIS information. Online access will increase awareness, options and citizen control in how they interact with county government.
Upper Minnesota Valley Region	Dawson / Boyd Schools	Community Digital Literacy	Community Digital Literacy will connect businesses, community members and students to support the creation of a digitally literate community through a Multimedia Collaboration Center, a Student Tech Team, and a hybrid (online and classroom) Teacher/ Community Training Academy.

22 The Upper Minnesota Valley Region consists of Big Stone, Chippewa, Lac qui Parle, Swift and Yellow Medicine counties

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Upper Minnesota Valley Region	Johnson Memorial Health Services	HomeStream	HomeStream will demonstrate the potential for using broadband- based remote support tools and enhanced family engagement with aging populations to define appropriate visits/hospitalizations and to achieve increased medication adherence for better health outcomes.
Upper Minnesota Valley Region	Lac qui Parle County Economic Development Authority (EDA)	Computer Commuter	Computer Commuter is an innovative mobile computer lab that increases the digital literacy of area residents and businesses, advances knowledge workers, and promotes broadband availability and digital inclusion.
Upper Minnesota Valley Region	Ortonville School / Ortonville Economic Development Authority (EDA)	Community Broadband Strategies	Community Broadband Strategies will increase Internet usage by 1) giving businesses an understanding of the uses and benefits access provides, 2) exposing community members to the information that they can obtain, 3) encouraging a viable economic community and a school system that uses technology, and 4) involving youth in the community's development, thereby encouraging them to return as adults.
Upper Minnesota Valley Region	Pioneer Public Television	Video on Rural Broadband Use	During the first phase of production, Pioneer will be developing a segment of approximately 14 minutes focusing on western Minnesota individuals and organizations affected by a lack of broadband availability. This segment will be produced in the third and fourth quarter of 2011 for submission to the national public television program, Need to Know, and will form the basis for a longer program of up to 28 minutes.
Upper Minnesota Valley Region	Upper Minnesota Valley RDC	Community Websites	This project will assist two cities (Bellingham and Echo) in the creation of community websites.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Willmar/Kandiyohi County	Economic Development Commission	Business Website Grant Program	Based on successful previously implemented grant program funded through a "Get Broadband" grant from Blandin Foundation, the EDC will allow businesses to apply for matching funds to develop a first-time website for their business or enhance an existing website to be interactive.
Willmar/Kandiyohi County	New London Spicer School District	Wildcat Nation Connected Classroom	The "Wildcat Nation Connected Classroom" is a high-tech and information-rich environment for students, staff and community members. The project will install a wireless network in the NLS High School and Middle School along with community access computers in designated areas of the building. In addition, funds will provide an iPad lab in the NLS High School and Middle School Media centers, using the technology to allow for individualized instruction and curriculum to meet the needs and skill level of every user. The iPad lab will also be used as a training center for adult learners with curriculum provided by the schools and delivered through Community Education. The lab will serve as a pilot program to measure the effectiveness of iPads for future implementation in schools and the overall education setting.
Willmar/Kandiyohi County	PCs for People Partnership	Computers for Low-income	PCs for People and KandiComp will provide low–cost computers and digital instruction to broadband disadvantaged persons to improve their quality of life and lessen their digital inclusion through Internet accessibility. KandiComp will become a satellite location under PCs for People to receive donated computers, "wipe" existing data from the hard drive, completely refurbish the machine and install new software. The computer will be sold to a guidelines-qualified person or family. Education will be provided. Future repairs will be provided for the PCs for People computers at a low, set price.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Willmar/Kandiyohi County	Willmar Community Senior Network	Senior Network	The Senior Network will demonstrate and assess the potential of using broadband technologies to engage seniors and connect them with their families to better improve their health, safety and quality of life on a daily basis. The project will connect the senior's family members and the Willmar Community Senior Network by providing an easy to use touch screen, all-in-one PC or notebook computer, webcam, and user support as well as training and broadband access, if needed.
Willmar/Kandiyohi County	MinnWest Technology Campus	Technology Classroom	Provide a remote learning center for a classroom with interactive communication capabilities for distance education courses, training and continuing education programs and video streaming of conferences and presentations.
Willmar/Kandiyohi County	Willmar Women & Family Center	Computer Access for Education and Employment	The Computer Access for Education and Employment Program has been designed to provide new immigrants easy access to computers, broadband Internet and the necessary training on computer, software and Internet usage. The CAEEP will provide a bank of computers in a bi-lingual environment. The Willmar Women & Family Center is a non-political environment where a clan or tribe is not a factor. Through coordination of the curriculum and a strong training program, the existing relationship between the Woman & Family and Workforce center will be enhanced.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Windom	Business, Arts & Recreation Center	Access to Technology, Today and Tomorrow	The Access to Technology, Today and Tomorrow project will enable virtually all Windom residents access to computer technology and the benefits of wireless Internet at convenient times in a variety of settings. The project will increase the use of broadband by supporting infrastructure development, bandwidth availability, and providing community members with access to better computer equipment such as large screen laptops and quality webcams.
Windom	City of Windom	Public Safety	Public Safety will install laptops, mobile network cards and software in fourteen emergency service and law enforcement vehicles to provide portable broadband access for instant information access during natural disasters, emergency situations and law enforcement responses. The access of computers and web-based technology in emergency service vehicles will supplement the ability of local law enforcement, ambulance services and fire response.
Windom	City of Windom	Finding Windom	This project will develop a community Internet portal called 'Finding Windom.' The portal will provide a conduit for all Internet queries on Windom and create links and connections to social media, businesses, services and visitor information. It will be used to market the wired City of Windom globally as a thriving progressive rural community, and attract new residents and businesses. Phase II of the project will modernize the look and functionality of the City's website.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Windom	Windom Area Schools	iPads for Intervention and Digital Inclusion	The purpose of this project is to increase the number of computers/ iPads accessible by students in elementary classrooms, and to host Community Education Classes on iPad use. The elementary classroom component will focus on students in the Response to Intervention Program, who struggle or are behind in their achievement and also tend to lack the financial resources to access technology.
Windom	Windom Area Schools	Wireless in the Schools	Wireless in the Schools will expand Internet access during and around the school day, and during school events, by utilizing a free, content-filtered Internet connection for students and others on their personal laptop computers. The updated and expanded access points to the entire high school will provide increased use by students and within classrooms. The project will also provide a wireless network for use by the community during other school and community events held at the school.
Windom	Windom Education & Collaborative Center/ Windom School District	Video Conferencing	Video Conferencing will increase broadband access in at least five locations in two separate buildings. Mobile video conferencing equipment and dedicated broadband access will provide community members of all ages the opportunities and experiences to produce and/or receive education and cultural broadcasts. Windom Area Schools will be able to access a wider array of course work and advanced teacher training as well as producing online course curriculum. Broadband usage will be available to all.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Winona	City of Winona	Digital Front Door Website	This project will fund the redesign of the City of Winona's website to function as a 'digital front door,' which will increase its usability and appeal to a wider audience. The redesign will include a new layout for the City's website, add four new information tabs on the front page, and provide links to other prominent websites in the community.
Winona	City of Winona	Innovative Public Access	Innovative Public Access will provide free Wi-Fi at four public locations in the City of Winona, wireless service in all public meeting rooms in City Hall, and web streaming video for Council chamber meetings (City Council, school board, etc.)
Winona	City of Winona	Winona PR Project	Create public relations material that will promote Winona's MIRC efforts and the City's Intelligent Community assets. The material will be published on the City's website and will be the first webpage that users see when logging into the City's four wireless internet portals. This project will also produce a press release disbursed to targeted media outlets in the regional area (La Crosse, WI to Rochester, MN to Minneapolis/St. Paul), promotional materials for the Digital Perch website produced for the Online Support Center Website project, and content for the City's Wireless portal at Levee Park.
Winona	Project FINE	Technology Education for Immigrants and Refugees	Technology Education for Immigrants and Refugees will provide customized Internet training in four phases: 1) Introduction to Technology, 2) Internet Access and Tools, 3) Access to Home Computers, and 4) Continuing Training. These classes will introduce Winona immigrants and refugees to the Internet and computers so they will be comfortable independently accessing the training options provided by the Winona Workforce Center and potentially the Minnesota Learning Commons.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Winona	Winona Workforce Center	E-Travel Center	The Winona Workforce Center will purchase four laptops and one laptop case for the E-Travel Center, a mobile laptop lab that can be set up at various community locations. The lab provides introduction to computers and basic Word and Excel tools training.
Winona	Winona Workforce Center	Online Support Center	The Workforce Center, in coordination with a web developer at Southeast Technical College will create a website that offers support to businesses exploring e-commerce, social media, and other internet business applications. In particular, the web developer will offer direct support through a blog on the website. The website will be a resource for individuals who have recently completed the Extension online training, for individuals who have completed new business training at the Workforce Center, and for small business in general.
Worthington	Nobles County Integration Collaborative	Cultural Awareness and Integration Grant	Nobles County Integration Collaborative will work with Cable TV3 on a project where high school students will learn how to use a video camera and video editing equipment. The students' first project will be to film and edit a video where they will interview adults about their heritage or immigration experiences, which will be shared with the community on Cable TV3 and in other settings. The video equipment will be used to record and share other Culture Corner events in the future.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Worthington	Nobles County Integration Collaborative	Computer Lab and Classes	Nobles County Integration Collaborative will purchase equipment for a small computer lab, as well as a set of laptops that will also be housed at NCIC, but can be checked out by area agencies for training purposes. The grant will also be used to purchase a wireless access point for the West Learning Center, which serves many immigrant families in the community. Nobles County Integration Collaborative will make the new computers available to the public during regular office hours (five days and two evenings per week). Additionally, the grant funds will be used to pay instructors to teach basic computer and Internet classes in two languages: Spanish and Karen. NCIC staff will also utilize the computers with families as they participate in college and career exploration programs offered at NCIC and with adult English language learners.
Worthington	St. Mary's School	21st Century Technology	St. Mary's School 21st Century Technology will implement new technology tools throughout the 2011 school year, with the first priority and immediate need of providing constant Internet access to the students, staff and volunteers. To better engage students in classroom projects and discussions, St. Mary's is working to incorporate new interactive technology, such as a SmartBoard, in the second grade classroom. This technology will allow students to work hands-on with a variety of online and downloadable activities. The final goal is to provide parents, students, and staff with a new user-friendly and content rich website that will also be used to inform parents during the school's transition towards its paperless initiative.

Community	Project Owner	Project Name	Project Description
Worthington	WGTN-TV (ISD 518)	Website Development	WGTN-TV will make available live and taped broadcasts of local daily programming including government meetings and community events via web streaming for those without cable TV access.
Worthington	Worthington ISD 518	iPad Integration Using Wireless Broadband	Worthington ISD 518 will provide interactive tools for teacher and student use in the classroom through the purchase of iPads, and expand broadband capabilities with additional wireless access points throughout the district. The iPads will be available to all students throughout the culturally and socioeconomically diverse district. The grant will allow for training on the use of interactive tools and wireless devices to all constituents in District 518, including community members with no children enrolled in the schools. This project will complement the district's plans to enhance broadband infrastructure in the schools.
Worthington	Worthington Regional Economic Development Commission	Portable Bioscience Labs	The Portable Bioscience Lab project will utilize advanced technology to transmit training and business information at a base site and throughout southwest Minnesota. The primary purpose is to work within the agricultural industry, and more specifically in the bioscience area, to promote training and business innovation. The project will provide digital learning and career exploration opportunities for high school students, increase skills for the employees in the identified industries, and create a network of information sharing.

For more information

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