

**USDA Rural Development
Telecommunications Program
Success Story: Community Connect Program; Traditional Telephone Program
Huerfano, NM**

Need:

Huerfano, New Mexico, a very small town of only 379 residents, is located in the northeast of the Navajo Nation reservation. The reservation consists of 27,000 square miles of beautiful, yet harsh land. According to the 2000 census the average per capita income of the Huerfano residents was \$7,333 compared to the national average of \$21,587. A third of all houses had no bedrooms, 52% had incomplete plumbing, and 54% were wood-heated only. A startling 77.5 % of homes had no telephone service. Along with these problematic numbers came isolation, poor health care, and insufficient public safety. The Chapter House, Community Center, Senior Center, Head Start and Dormitory are all close to each other, but these vital buildings did not have phone or Internet connections. The community was so disconnected that multiple reports from just a year ago existed of Huerfano adults dying of heart attacks, bleeding to death after wild dog attacks, and of children dying from seemingly small injuries.

How Rural Development Helped:

Through a USDA Rural Development Community Connect broadband grant awarded in 2005 totaling \$436,461, Sacred Wind Communications (SWC) has been able to bring both phone and internet service to Huerfano. SWC contributed an additional \$86,500 of its own funds to make this project work. Since December of 2006, over 200 previously unserved homes have received phone service across SWC's territory through the extension of drop wires financed by two Rural Development traditional telephone loans in the amounts of \$14.5 million and \$55.7 million. Telephones have been installed in all community buildings and broadband connectivity has been delivered to the Huerfano Chapter House, Dormitory School, and brand-new, 10-computer Community Center. SWC was created with a mission to improve all of the Navajo Nation by connecting it to the rest of America, while simultaneously maintaining Navajo culture. Financing from Rural Development assisted SWC in achieving this goal.

Result:

With the introduction of phone service and modern telecommunications, things have begun to improve. Phone service is making its way into many unserved homes, and on June 3, 2007, SWC proudly announced that its 100th new customer had been connected to the public telephone network. While this may not seem like a huge number of customers, amid the many barriers of land acquisition and rights-of-way in the area, this really is a success. Mrs. Delgarito, the 100th new customer, stated that, "It was easier to get telephone service than I thought it would be. I've told all my neighbors about Sacred

Wind.” As a Tribal Lifeline Rate qualifier, Mrs. Delgarito pays only \$1 per month for telephone service, as do hundreds of others in Navajo Nation.

In the eight months the Huerfano Computer Training Center has been operational, there have been over 4,000 visits to the center. Thanks to the help and instruction provided by one full-time trainer, one part-time trainer, and one student intern, learning to use the computers and internet has been facilitated for the residents of Huerfano. Many additional training sessions are offered as well for residents of all ages. Once qualifying low-income community members have completed a formal training course they may receive their own refurbished computer for use in their home, and 44 computers have been distributed.

According to Janice Badal, SWC’s nonprofit organization’s Executive Director, people who visit the Center every week range greatly in age and come for a myriad of reasons. From pre-schoolers who go to the Center to simply play games, to schoolchildren who do research for papers and complete homework, to high school grads who apply for tech colleges, the educational benefits of the Center are evident. Teachers have stated that many Navajo children would simply not do their homework assignments in the past rather than admit to not having computer access, but the Center has changed this. Additionally, students who miss classes can use the lab for tele-education, making up the assignments. Just recently, a girl ran into the Center, proclaiming that she had received her first-ever A on a school paper, thanks largely to the research that she had done on the Internet. Also recently a high school grad completed her application to a tech-vocational college at the Center, and will be attending this fall. As Janice Badal sums it up, “Finally they can act like their teen counterparts in urban areas,” receiving all of these educational benefits, but just as importantly engaging in surfing the net and emailing as well. As Wilson Ray, the President of the Huerfano Chapter, expresses, “We want our young people to come back and stay in the community; we want our kids to work here.”

Benefits are not at all exclusive to Huerfano’s youth, however. A number of unemployed adults have not only found jobs to apply for and complete applications online, but a few have already reported job offers. The mother of a soldier in Iraq, whom she had not contacted for nearly a full year, now exchanges emails with him numerous times a week. Even the elderly are finding value in the Center, checking up on health information for both themselves and their animals on a regular basis.

The Center is delivering great opportunities to the artists of Huerfano, helping to preserve the Navajo culture and show it to the outside world. Many craftspeople have found a market for their wares on the internet. Navajo musician Skylar Wolf, who previously had no real audience in such an isolated landscape, now records in the Center and is well on his way to creating and marketing a complete CD. As he puts it, “I’m just pushing my music out. I’ve gotten offers from labels, producers... and found venues. Ninety percent of the work is done on the computer.” While Skylar is achieving economic success, he has also used the internet to contact hospitals where he has offered to play for sick children. As Janice Badal says, “It’s not just to introduce the Navajo people to the world,

it's for people around the world to meet the Navajo people. You have something nobody else has in your art, culture and traditions.”

Ms. Badal believes opportunities in Huerfano have increased greatly as a result of the arrival of modern telecommunications. “We want to show being in a rural area and providing this type of service, how it would impact people... there's a lot going on in that tiny computer lab. The people in this community feel more connected to the outside world. There is a sense that they have another avenue of life that is open to them, more possibilities.” Mrs. Sorraine Hot, a member of the Navajo Nation, recently put her ideas to paper. An essay contest was sponsored by the Alliance for Public Technology. Hundreds of people responded to the essay title, “How Broadband Changed My Life.” Mrs. Hot decided to compete and won first prize. The prize includes \$1,000 and a trip to Washington to speak on the benefits of the Internet for low income communities. Not only is she teaching others how to use the computer at the community center, but she is inspiring others to push for Broadband in their communities!