



Committed to the future of rural communities.

*USDA Rural Development: Telecommunications Program;
Community Connect Grant Program and Telecommunications
Infrastructure Loan Program—New Mexico*

Sacred Wind Communications

Need:

Huerfano, New Mexico, is a very small town of only about 400 residents, located in the northeast of the Navajo Nation reservation. The reservation consists of 27,000 square miles of beautiful, yet harsh land. The average per capita income of the Huerfano residents is \$7,333 compared to the national average of \$21,587. More than 70% of homes had no telephone service. Huerfano suffered from isolation, poor health care and insufficient public safety. Vital buildings in the community, such as the Chapter House, Community Center, Senior Center, Head Start and Dormitory School, did not possess phone or Internet connections which left the community disadvantaged. Other parts of northwestern New Mexico were also without basic telephone service and access to broadband.

How Rural Development Helped:

In 2005, Sacred Wind Communications (SWC) was awarded a USDA Rural Development Community Connect broadband grant for \$436,461, to provide both phone and Internet services to Huerfano. SWC contributed an additional \$86,500 of its own funds to guarantee the success of the project. Telephones have been installed in all community buildings and broadband connectivity has been delivered to the Huerfano Chapter House, school and other community buildings, and the grant funded a new Computer Training Center open to the public.

In addition, SWC was awarded two Rural Development Telecommunications Infrastructure Loan Program loans in the amounts of \$14.5 million and \$55.7 million in 2006 for telecommunications network deployment on the Navajo Reservation. These loans funded central offices, warehouses, communications towers, new fiber and upgraded and expanded copper network facilities. SWC has been on a mission to improve all of the Navajo Nation by connecting it to



Navajo children connecting to the Internet in the Community Center built with Community Connect funds

the rest of America, while simultaneously maintaining Navajo culture. The funding from Rural Development has assisted SWC in achieving this goal.

Results:

SWC introduced phone service and modern telecommunications which greatly improved conditions on the Reservation. SWC serves about 2,700 customers including 700 homes which never had telephone service. Staying in touch with family members and doctors over the telephone is very important to the Navajo. Janice Badal, SWC's nonprofit organization's Executive Director, mentioned a story of an older Navajo woman watching as a telephone was installed in her home, and when the phone rang for the first time she cried and blessed the technician.

The Huerfano Community Connect grant has opened new doors for internet usage on the reservation, as well. The Huerfano Computer Training Center has an average of 300-700 users per week depending on the season. Many different educational

programs are offered to residents of all ages, including a program that provides refurbished computers to qualified low-income community members who have completed a formal training course.

According to Janice Badal, a wide range of age groups visit the Computer Training Center every week and come for a variety of reasons. High school grads can apply for college and college students can turn in homework and research for projects online. As Janice Badal sums it up, “Finally they can act like their teen counterparts in urban areas,” receiving all of these educational benefits. Wilson Ray, the President of the Huerfano Chapter, states, “We want our young people to come back and stay in the community; we want our kids to work here.”

Benefits are not exclusive to Huerfano’s youth. Many adults have been able to utilize the Internet to complete job applications online. The community can now communicate outside the reservation, including emailing tribal family members serving overseas. Even the elderly are finding value in the Computer Training Center, checking up on health information and filling out applications for social security online. The Internet has allowed Navajos to preserve and display their music, painting, and other traditions. Many craftspeople have found a market for their wares on the internet. 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 tribal member who works at the Computer Training Center, 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 competed

and won first prize. The prize included \$1,000 and a trip to Washington to speak on the benefits of the Internet for low income communities. Mrs. Hot not only taught Navajos at the Computer Training Center, but she has inspired others to push for broadband in their communities.

In October 2009, American Express announced that Sacred Wind Communications was voted “the most inspiring small business in America” in the company’s “Shine A Light” program. This distinguished honor was awarded after the public voted for the best business based on innovation, community spirit and customer service. SWC was awarded \$100,000 in grants and marketing support from American Express. John Badal, co-founder and CEO of SWC, said the prize money has been and will continue to be used to further extend Sacred Wind’s commitment to serving the Navajo people with advanced technology and educational resources.