



VTX1 Companies

COMPASS

VOL. 1, NO. 1

PRIORITIZING PATIENTS

Smith Family Medicine
puts people first



FORGING CONNECTIONS

VTX1 links rural South Texas
to the world

A HIGH-TECH LIFELINE

Telemedicine powers up
rural health care



— By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO —
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

A good way to start the New Year

NTCA members make a real difference in their communities, and in the lives of the people they serve. I was reminded of this a few weeks ago when the Foundation for Rural Service announced it had awarded \$100,000 in FRS Community Grants to groups throughout the U.S. FRS is the nonprofit arm of NTCA that supports rural telecom companies, consumers and policymakers with educational information, products and programming.

Each year, community organizations apply for FRS grants to help them tackle challenges ranging from accessing technology and improving educational offerings to providing telemedicine and first-responder services to rural areas. Applications are sponsored by their local telco.

It was also exciting to see the USDA award several ReConnect grants and loans to NTCA members toward the end of the year. This program represents yet another option for rural broadband funding, as well as an example of public/private partnerships at work to extend broadband to unserved communities.

After all, investments by federal and state agencies, coupled with the commitment of rural broadband providers, are key to our nation's progress in connecting the millions of citizens still without access to fast, reliable internet service.

These programs, as well as the engagement we saw among policymakers at our Telecom Executive Policy Summit in November, provide a strong start to 2020 and give me great hope for a strong new year for rural broadband. ☑



Are you ready for a telehealth future?

Story by STEPHEN V. SMITH

The presence of reliable broadband service holds great promise for rural America. While it touches many facets of life, broadband's greatest impact may very well be in the area of health care. Consider this statement from the Federal Communications Commission:

“Advances in telemedicine are transforming health care from a service delivered solely through traditional brick and mortar health care facilities to connected care options delivered via a broadband internet access connection directly to the patient's home or mobile location.”

While reliable access to a broadband network is still out of reach for millions of rural Americans, hundreds of cooperative and independent telecommunications companies across the country are delivering world-class internet service, often over a fiber connection. If you received this magazine in the mail, your local telco is one of those leading-edge providers.

If access to broadband is becoming less of the challenge to telehealth's wide-scale availability, what is the greatest challenge? The FCC recently tasked the Intergovernmental Advisory Committee with studying and reporting on telehealth barriers and incentives. The report stated that “people-based” issues offer the most significant challenges to telehealth adoption. While this includes many factors, such as policy and licensing, broadband adoption is a leading concern.

In other words, the technology is there. Now, people need to embrace it.

“Increasing support must be given to rural and disadvantaged communities so that digital literacy and adoption does not exacerbate the digital divide,” the IAC report states. Quite simply, the presence of broadband doesn't mean patients and doctors are ready to put it to use as part of their health care program.

Are you ready? Do you understand the implications of telehealth? What steps can you take toward enjoying its benefits?

Begin by asking your doctor what programs are available. This could include connected medical devices in your home or something as simple as remote monitoring via an app on your smartphone or tablet. Of course, access to telehealth starts with subscribing to broadband service that will support this life-changing technology. And once in place, broadband has the potential to enhance your life in many other ways as well. ☑

Knowledge is power

Does your digital know-how stand up?



Story by NOBLE SPRAYBERRY

Convenience and power. Internet services bring both. Online bill pay eliminates a tedious task. Social media can keep family ties strong or reconnect you with old friends. Streaming services bring a wealth of music, books and more.

But when it comes to digital tools, knowledge is power, and the Pew Research Center's recent "Americans and Digital Knowledge" report found that a majority of adults in the U.S.

could not correctly answer half of the survey's 10 multiple-choice questions.

Questions touched on security and a general understanding of technology. Here are a few of the queries, edited for clarity, focused on security and privacy — good information to know. The answers do include additional context and tips not included in the report.

Q If a website uses cookies, it means that the site ...

A: Cookies allow websites to track user visits and site activity. They are common, and you are often tracked across the websites you visit.

Q Where might someone encounter a phishing scam?

A: Phishing scams can occur on social media, websites, email or text messages. Each form of communication offers an avenue for exploitation. For additional tips to improve your online security, visit [FCC.gov/consumer-guides](https://www.fcc.gov/consumer-guides).

Q What is the largest source of revenue for most major social media platforms? (Several possible options were listed.)

A: Advertising is the largest source of revenue for most social media plat-

forms. Often advertising is personalized to you by information gathered from not only your activities on a social media site but also your actions on other websites.

Q When a website has a privacy policy, it means that the site ...

A: Privacy policies are contracts between websites and users about how those sites will use their data. Often long and legalistic, the agreements may outline how your private information can be used to target advertising or whether or not your information can be shared with other companies.

Q What does it mean when a website has "https://" at the beginning of its URL, as opposed to "http://" without the "s"?

A: "https://" in a URL means that

information entered into the site is encrypted. Look for "https://" before completing any financial transaction on a site.

Q Many web browsers offer a feature known as "private browsing" or "incognito mode." If someone opens a webpage on their computer at work using incognito mode, who will be able to see their online activities?

A: Private browsing mode only prevents someone using the same computer from seeing one's online activities. In most cases, your internet provider, including your phone wireless provider, can see all digital traffic passing from your device to the internet.

Want to see the entire report?

Do a Google search for "Pew Research Center and Americans and Digital Knowledge."

Introducing COMPASS magazine

VTX1 Companies is investing in our community, and we have something fresh to unveil. We are pleased to introduce the new COMPASS magazine.



DAVE OSBORN
Chief Executive Officer

VTX1 is deeply committed to those we serve in South Texas. In order to share the stories of those communities and our role within them, we've developed this new member magazine — now bigger and better than any communications piece we've done before.

Our goal is to improve our communication with members and customers alike, which will help educate about new industry trends, community activities and news from your cooperative. With our new format, we will publish magazines like this

one six times a year. With our continued growth and the changes within our industry, we want to provide you with as much information as possible.

Through these pages we will update you on network upgrades, share information about our services and shine a spotlight on local citizens and organizations who are using technology to create something special. You'll also find helpful tips, industry news and interesting feature stories from across South Texas.

As a member-owned cooperative, VTX1 works make cost-effective decisions. In the case of this magazine, we've partnered with 21 other rural telcos in Texas and five other states to produce this magazine in a way that makes it affordable to each company. We really hope you enjoy the new COMPASS.

We have so much good news to share. We've invested millions of dollars already in a fiber optic network throughout our territory.

VTX1 is committed to these investments in our part of Texas. We know building our infrastructure and making upgrades to our services are good investments because our community is counting on us to pave the way for the future. We're working diligently to equip our cooperative for the demands our members may have in the years to come — and doing so as quickly as our resources allow.

We know with technology, change is the one thing we can count on. Times are changing, and so are we. No longer are we just a telephone company; we are your full-service communications provider. Thank you for placing your trust in us, and for allowing us to earn your business. 



VTX1 Companies

Raymondville Corporate Office

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George West Office

510 Bowie St. • George West, TX 78022

Jourdanton Office

511 Main St. • Jourdanton, TX 78026

Seguin Office

3547 N. Hwy. 123 Bypass • Seguin, TX 78155
830-379-0660

San Antonio Office

6884 Alamo Downs Pkwy • San Antonio, TX 78238
888-651-6080

Hours of Operation:

- Business Offices:
Mon-Fri. • 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
- Customer Service:
Mon-Fri. • 8 a.m.-7 p.m.
- VTCI & Fiber Tech Support:
Mon-Fri. • 8 a.m.- 9 p.m., Sat-Sun. • 10 a.m.-7 p.m.
- Wireless Tech Support:
Mon-Sun. • 24/7

Phone: 800-446-2031

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Produced for VTX1 by:

WORDSOUTH
A CONTENT MARKETING COMPANY

On the Cover:



Dr. Albert Smith returned to Willacy County to fulfill his dream of being a small-town doctor. See story Page 12.



Apply now for the VTX1 Companies scholarship program

Valley Telephone Cooperative, Inc. will award as many as twenty \$3,000 scholarships to students whose parents are cooperative members.

The awards are renewable for up to three additional years or until the completion of a bachelor's degree. And the scholarship will increase by \$250 annually if the student maintains a 3.0 grade point average or higher each year of college. Additional rules apply.

Scholarship America administers the scholarship program, including the selection of the recipients. The application deadline is March 18, 2020. Visit scholarshipamerica.org for additional information.



Lifeline Service

Lifeline is a government assistance program that provides monthly discounts to eligible telecommunications services. Customers eligible for the federal Lifeline discount may apply the discount to qualifying voice or qualifying broadband services, while the state Lifeline discount may be applied to qualifying voice services only. Customers who are eligible for voice Lifeline service are also eligible for toll blocking at no charge. Your cooperative offers reduced rates to eligible low-income residential customers through Lifeline.

ELIGIBILITY

To be eligible for the federal Lifeline discount, a household's annual income must be at or below 135% of the federal poverty guidelines, or someone in the household must receive benefits from at least one of the following programs: Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Supplemental Security Income, Federal

Public Housing Assistance, Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit, or Tribal Programs set forth in 47 C.F.R. Section 54.409(b)

To be eligible for the state Lifeline discount, a household's annual income must be at or below 150% of the federal poverty guidelines, or someone in the household must receive benefits from at least one of the following programs: Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Supplemental Security Income, Federal Public Housing Assistance, Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, health coverage under the state Children's Health Insurance Program, National School Lunch Program's free lunch program or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

HOW TO ENROLL

If you have qualifying telecommunications service and participate in one of the programs listed and you are not receiving the Lifeline service reduction, please

contact the Low Income Discount Administrator, or LIDA, at 866-454-8387. If your household meets the low income standard, you may apply to receive Lifeline service by requesting a self-enrollment form from the LIDA. The self-enrollment form must be completed by the applicant and mailed to the following address:

LITE-UP Texas
1779 Wells Branch Parkway, Suite 110B #357
Austin, TX 78728-7022

DISCOUNTS AND BENEFITS

Lifeline service is limited to one discount per household. A household is everyone who lives in the home, including children and people who are not related to the customer, and shares income and household expenses. A customer with Lifeline service may not transfer the Lifeline benefit to any other person.

San Antonio's Botanical Garden provides a beautiful, peaceful destination for all seasons.

Texas in Bloom

While Mother Nature takes her long winter's nap, San Antonio's Botanical Garden awakens a desire to see what beauty lies not only at the back door but also in regions around the world.

In the midst of winter, the gardens are a place of wonder. At the entrance, there's a sign letting you know what flowers are in bloom and where you can find them. "The months of January and February are a great time to visit," says Eliana Rodriguez, the garden's director of marketing. She says it's the best time to see winter-blooming plants like snapdragons, pansies, violas and lots of colorful kale, as well as some of the grasses native to the Lone Star State, such as yellow Indiangrass, little bluestem and others.

"Walking on a carpet of fallen leaves along the trails can give visitors an appreciation of the form and shape of our beautiful deciduous native trees," she says. And, she adds, the winter months are a great time to bring binoculars to see the birds that migrate to the San Antonio area during the cooler months of the year.

The birdwatch structure has benches for comfort and special viewing portals for birding. You might see a painted bunting, black-chinned hummingbird or a purple martin. "Each season brings a variety of animals and plants to the garden," Rodriguez says.

San Antonio Botanical Garden opened in 1980 on land that was a waterworks and reservoir in the latter part of the 19th century. Remnants of a limestone wall from the old reservoir now form a natural outdoor amphitheater where performances, events and classes regularly take place. Today, the San Antonio Botanical Garden welcomes guests to colorful floral displays true to Texas native areas and futuristic glass pyramids filled with exotic plants from around the world.

A recent expansion with free parking includes the Zachry Foundation Culinary Garden and an outdoor Chef Teaching Kitchen located in the Goldsbury Foundation Pavilion, both of which tie into the city of San Antonio's recent designation by UNESCO as a Creative City of Gastronomy. Only two cities in the United States have gotten this honor, and San Antonio is the first city in Texas to receive it. The garden's culinary programming encourages guests to discover local fruits, vegetables and herbs that grow in Texas.



In the garden, there is much to see, ranging from the common to more unusual plants from around the world.

Some of the latter are:

- The silk floss tree in the Conservatory Courtyard. Notice its spiky trunk and, in the spring, its beautiful, large hibiscus-like flowers.
- The screw pine with its eye-catching stilt-like prop roots and a swirl of foliage. It doesn't look like a pine at all.
- The ponytail palm with a bulb-like trunk and long, curling leaves.
- Located on the garden's Texas trail is the tiny limoncillo, perhaps the rarest of all trees in America.

Programming is a big part of life in the garden. Adults can register for classes on art and culture, gardening, health and wellness, and cooking. There's a nice choice of activities for the children, too:

- Little Sprout Mondays offer crafts and lots of hands-on explorations for kids ages 3 to 5.
- Children ages 7 to 16 can get their hands dirty in the Children's Vegetable Garden Program.
- Summer day camps immerse children in cooking and gardening.

The Family Adventure Garden occupies 2.5 acres of the garden and is one of the most exciting parts of the new expansion. It's a place where children and adults can have fun, safe, hands-on play, tumbling down a hillside, snaking through a tunnel, and discovering creeks and ponds. It's also a place to use your imagination and explore the "regions" of South Texas from an urban backyard to the Texas Hill Country and the many plants found in those areas.

Rodriguez says the staff at the botanical garden wants people to realize it's more than a place to see pretty plants.

"We want people to realize that this is a place to learn about the different types of plants that can help and preserve our local ecosystem and the way plants can improve our health and mental wellness," she says. "They can learn where our food comes from or simply use it as a place to reconnect with nature while having fun and gaining a new appreciation for the natural world." 🗨️

Gardens around Texas

The Lone star State shines with botanical gardens featuring plants from around the globe

- **Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden:** This botanical garden in Dallas is more than just a beautiful garden. It's also a leading horticultural research spot and plays host to a number of educational programs and events. On the shores of White Rock Lake, this botanical garden spans 86 acres and is home to 19 unique gardens.
- **Zilker Botanical Garden:** Located in the heart of Austin, Zilker Botanical Garden features a number of different gardens with ponds and trails connecting them. A visit to this botanical garden in Texas' capital city is free, so it's a popular place to visit for those on a budget.
- **Fort Worth Botanic Garden:** This garden in Fort Worth, the oldest of all botanical gardens in Texas, lies on 109 sprawling acres and features a rose garden, rainforest conservancy, a boardwalk with native plants and more. Admission to most of the garden is free. Only the Japanese garden requires a small admission fee to enter.
- **Hermann Park Japanese Garden:** Peace and tranquility are the order of the day at this Japanese garden in Houston. It's complete with a wide variety of Japanese plants, such as Japanese maples and cherry trees, and you'll feel complete serenity as you walk through the winding paths and bridges leading to bubbling ponds and even a teahouse.

IF YOU GO

Where: San Antonio Botanical Garden, 555 Funston Place, San Antonio, Texas.

Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

Information: 210-536-1400 or online at www.sabot.org.



Indoor spaces at San Antonio's Botanical Garden allow for a diversity of plants.

CONNECTING

communities

VTX1 LINKS PEOPLE IN RAYMONDVILLE AND BEYOND

Story by ANDREA AGARDY | Photography by MELISSA GAINES

Today, most of us carry little computers in our pockets, and we take making a phone call for granted. But in the not-too-distant past, connecting by phone was not possible in large portions of the country.

While telephones were becoming commonplace in cities as early as the 1920s and '30s, rural towns like Raymondville remained communication deserts thirsting to make a connection. "Until they came up with Universal Service funding like they did for electricity, no one would serve us because the populations were so sparse that it was not economically feasible to provide service to us out here unless they charged us 100 times the rate of dense population areas," says VTX1 District 1 Director J.T. Mayo Jr.

Thanks to the efforts of a group of dedicated residents — including Mayo's parents, Zelda and Julian Talmadge "J.T." Mayo Sr. — Valley Telephone Cooperative Inc. came to be. Now, it's VTX1, a company providing its users with the latest in communication services and technology.

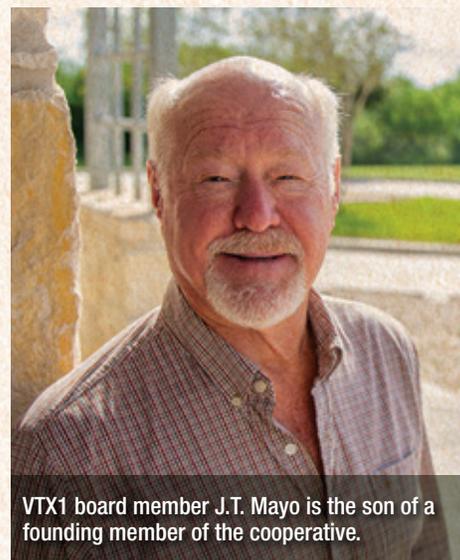
LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

After World War II, Mayo's parents relocated to Willacy County. "My father was part of a group of Texas A&M students where the entire corps of cadets shipped off to war and school was over," Mayo says. "He went to war in Europe, and he was an officer in Patton's 3rd Army." After the war ended, J.T. Mayo Sr. finished his degree and was designing commercial air conditioning systems in Dallas when he accepted his father's offer to help run the family farm.

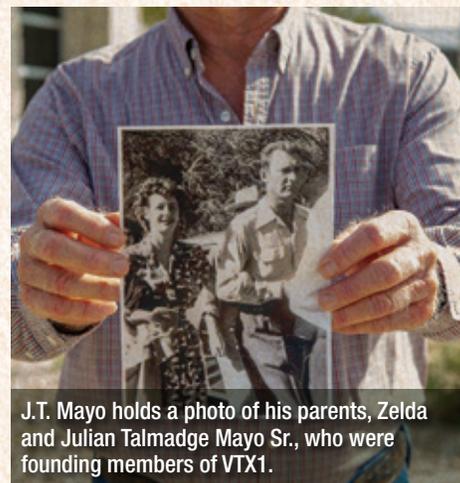
It wasn't long before J.T. Mayo Jr. was on the way, and his expectant mother began to worry. "She became pregnant with me in September of 1950," Mayo says. "She was concerned about being stuck out in the country and pregnant with no car or communication while Dad was at work." After reading a newspaper article about federal programs to help establish rural telephone cooperatives, she encouraged her husband to attend a meeting in Monte Alto, with hopes of having a phone before her son was born. "And when he came back, they started a petition to sign up prospective members to start and fund the co-op," Mayo says.

Mayo's parents weren't alone in their quest for connection. A task force was formed in the early 1950s, and a series of community meetings were held in Willacy, Cameron, Starr, Kennedy and Hidalgo counties. Over the next two years, involved individuals chose a cooperative name, completed a charter application, drafted and adopted bylaws and elected a seven-member board of directors. The directors had the tasks of getting their neighbors to sign on and of applying for low-interest federal loans to build the system.

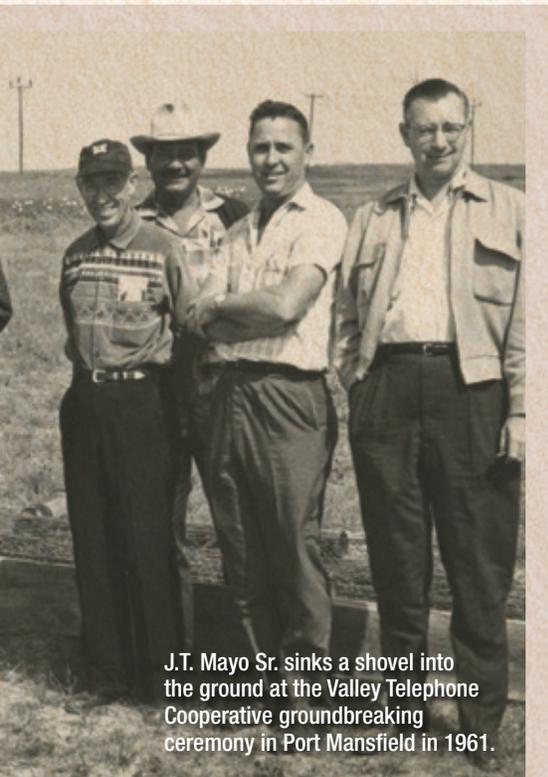
The Universal Service Fund was one tool they used. The federal initiative emerged in the 1930s to ensure all Americans have equal access to communications services. Through subsidies and fees managed by the Federal Communications Commission, discounts go to rural communities as well as low-income families, schools and libraries.



VTX1 board member J.T. Mayo is the son of a founding member of the cooperative.



J.T. Mayo holds a photo of his parents, Zelda and Julian Talmadge Mayo Sr., who were founding members of VTX1.



J.T. Mayo Sr. sinks a shovel into the ground at the Valley Telephone Cooperative groundbreaking ceremony in Port Mansfield in 1961.

The first Valley Telephone Cooperative members began making and receiving calls in 1957. “That was always a big joke in the family,” says Mayo, noting his mother missed the goal of having phone service before he arrived in the world. “I was born in May of 1951, and we got our first telephone when I was 6 years old.”

NURTURING A NETWORK

Keeping the funding flowing was a big concern in the early days of the cooperative. “My dad served 50 years on the board, and I grew up listening to him discussing the concerns with my mother at the kitchen table,” Mayo says. “That was a lot of what our conversation was when I was growing up. I sat around the kitchen table listening to my dad lamenting how they were going to get enough funds to keep the doors open.”

The doors did stay open. In fact, the cooperative has grown exponentially, from its headquarters in Raymondville to branch offices in Dilley, George West, Seguin, Falfurrias and Jourdanton. The coverage area spans more than 40,000 square miles. In 2013, the company consolidated its holdings and took on a new name. VTX1 now has about 20,000 customers and provides not only telephone service but also fiber and wireless internet service.

Mayo has served on the board since 2003, filling the seat his father left when he retired after 50 years as a director. “When my dad got off the board, things were changing a lot with the fiber optics and the deployment of all that stuff,” he says. “It was really interesting, and I said, ‘Well, you know, I might as well jump in on this and carry on.’ Things are changing so quickly. It’s mind-boggling to see what’s going on.”

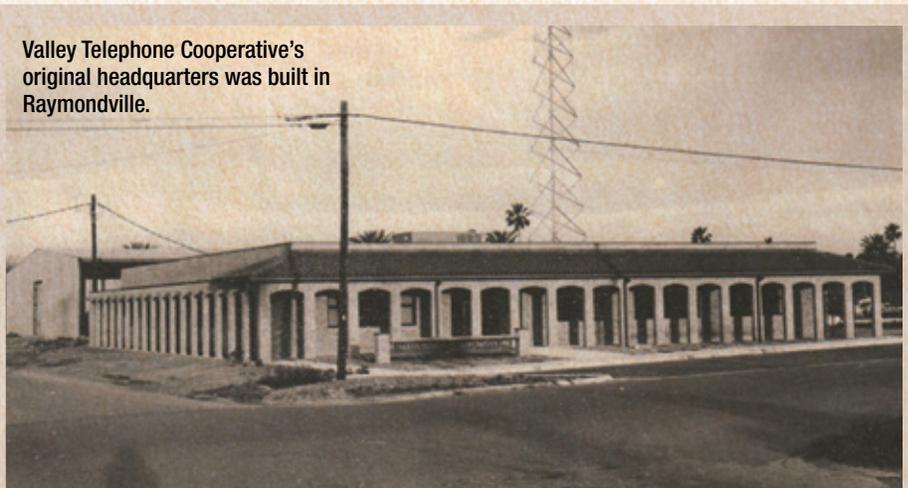
Did you know?

- Edward Burluson Raymond, a former employee of the King Ranch, established the town of Raymondville in 1904. That same year, the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico railway established right of way. Nineteen miles of track spanning Raymondville and Santa Monica opened in 1928.
- William A. Hardy used his gas tractor, plow and other equipment to carve Raymondville's earliest roads out of what had previously been cattle trails.
- In 1920, President-elect Warren G. Harding's train made a stop in Raymondville en route to an Armistice Day celebration in Brownsville. Schoolchildren were allowed to skip class for the day so they could greet the train.
- Throughout its history, Raymondville has been a trade center, first for local farmers and currently for trucking and fruit crops from the surrounding area.

Sources: "Willacy County History - The Early Years" by Glenn Harding and Cindy Lee and the Texas State Historical Association



Valley Telephone Cooperative board members and officials pose for a group photo early in the cooperative's history.



Valley Telephone Cooperative's original headquarters was built in Raymondville.

Old photos courtesy of J.T. Mayo Jr.



Telemedicine changes the health care landscape

Broadband makes a difference daily

Imagine a world with greater health care accessibility, as convenient as contacting a physician from your home. Or consider a medical system where rural communities can easily connect in real time with specialists based dozens, if not hundreds, of miles away.

Broadband technology provides the key link between you and medical providers needed to make those innovations and others possible, and that more convenient, healthier world is becoming a reality for rural communities across the nation. The systems are not yet what they one day may become, but every day more and more people are receiving the benefits of telemedicine. And the results are often profound.

Kentucky veterans have easier access to important care. Changing laws in states such as Texas allow greater access to telemedicine. Telestroke programs in Minnesota and North Dakota save vital minutes when patients most need care. And those are just a few examples of broadband technology changing health care for the better.

KENTUCKY VETERANS

In rural Kentucky, getting to and from an appointment at any medical specialist can often require hours of travel. But when you're a veteran trying to get to a Veterans Administration Medical Center in a metropolitan area, travel times can increase even more. And a veteran might need multiple doctors and have multiple appointments scheduled on different days.

An innovative pilot program in a mountainous section of eastern Kentucky is helping to change that. The Virtual Living Room program, which started in 2017 in McKee, offers vets a comfortable and private room in their local library complete with high-speed internet access to visit with VA health care providers located more than an hour's drive away.

The program, available for setup at other qualifying sites, not only illustrates the potential of telemedicine but also shows the efforts being made to create a system capable of benefiting as many people as possible.

The McKee Virtual Living Room is a collaboration among four organizations: the VA, NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association, the rural telecom provider Peoples Rural Telephone Cooperative and the Jackson County Public Library. The VA has provided telehealth services for several years, but it can't happen if vets don't have access to high-speed internet connections either in their homes or nearby.

"The rest of the country, like us, really admires our veterans," says Keith Gabbard, chief executive officer of PRTC. "Before the project, we saw veterans spending the day in a waiting room at the hospital, and when they live an hour and a half away, it's pretty much an all-day event for a veteran to get health care."

Fast fiber optic internet networks make telemedicine a realistic option for more and more communities, and the cooperative was a leader in establishing the Virtual Living Room at the Jackson County Public Library.

"We've done a lot to promote it, and the library staff and the veterans are really proud of it," Gabbard says. "It's a source of pride for our community, and it continues to grow. The Virtual Living Room is a beautiful area where veterans, even



◀ From left, Veterans Donald Barrett, Jim Bryant, Mike Montgomery, Bobby Lakes and Danny Robinson attend the ribbon cutting for Virtual Living Room in McKee, Kentucky.

if they don't have a doctor's appointment, can go and read a book. It feels like it's their home."

CHANGING LAWS

While faster internet may provide the foundation for telemedicine services, the legal and regulatory framework of each state can play a role in determining the effectiveness of the programs.

In May 2017, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott signed a bill into law that leveled the playing field for telemedicine physicians and doctors who work in traditional office settings. In part, the law eliminated a requirement for a patient to first visit a physician in person before receiving care through telemedicine.

"The bill removed a lot of barriers, and we've seen an increase in queries about telehealth," says Becky Bounds, program manager for the TexLa Telehealth Resource Center in Lubbock, Texas. The federally funded center works to provide resources and technical assistance to telehealth programs in Texas and Louisiana.

Bounds says the internet-based tools offer key services. For example, Lubbock is home to the Timothy J. Harnar Regional Burn Center, which often receives patients injured while working in the industries of West Texas. After treatment and returning home, follow-up visits to Lubbock could require drives of five to six hours. However, a telemedicine-equipped clinic on the campus of Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center in El Paso allows patients to virtually visit with specialists in Lubbock.

"About 12% of the state's population lives in West Texas, and telehealth matters,"

Bounds says. "We are producing cotton, beef, oil and more, and we need health care for the workforce producing those products for the rest of the state and the nation."

THE GOLDEN HOUR

When it comes to treating a stroke, doctors have a saying: Time is brain. It's a reminder that every minute that passes between the event and treatment can lead to irreversible damage. Fortunately, telemedicine technology already gives doctors a fighting chance to begin treating patients before the critical "golden hour" passes.

One of the leaders for this technology in the Midwest is Essentia Health, which established telemedicine capabilities in each of its 17 hospitals, 70 clinics and eight nursing homes throughout Minnesota and North Dakota. With its telestroke program, emergency medical technicians can identify stroke patients on the way to the hospital and even begin treatment.

Essentia Director of Telehealth Services Laurie Hall recalls an ambulance picking up a rural patient nearly 90 minutes from the nearest hospital. In the past, serious brain damage would have been a near certainty for such a patient. But thanks to telestroke technology, EMTs diagnosed a stroke and began treatment about 45 minutes after the stroke occurred.

"The goal is to shorten that window from the time the patient has the event to the time they actually get those

clot-busting medications or the clot is removed," Hall says. "Getting that done so quickly is profound when you think about the injury that could happen from just those few extra minutes. It helps these patients get out of the hospital much quicker and to get on with their normal lives." 📱





Caring

FOR HIS COMMUNITY

Willacy County's Dr. Albert Smith fulfills his dreams

Story by ANDREA AGARDY | Photography by MELISSA GAINES

Some little boys dream of becoming superheroes or baseball players, but not Albert Smith. Growing up on his family's Willacy County farm, Smith — now Dr. Smith — knew at a very early age that he wanted to devote his life to keeping his community healthy.

"I'm not sure what sparked the interest," he says. "But at 5 years old, I said I wanted to be a doctor, and that stuck. My dad died around that time from a long illness, and my mother thinks that's what triggered my desire to be a physician. I just remember that somehow I decided I wanted to be a doctor, and I never changed from that."

While at Lyford High School, Smith set his sights squarely on medical school. "That was the focus," he says, "whatever I needed to do to become a physician." He went on to Rice University, followed by medical school at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas and a residency at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

Because he wanted to learn as much as he could, Smith chose to pursue family medicine. "Every discipline we studied I was fascinated with, and the only one that dealt with all of them was family medicine," he says. "After I was boarded in family medicine, I did a lot of emergency room medicine because it gives you great experience."

Smith soaked up all the knowledge he could while working in ERs in Harlingen,

Weslaco and McAllen, with a singular goal in mind — bringing what he learned back to a rural community.

COMING HOME

These days, the doctor can be found treating patients in the Raymondville office of Smith Family Medicine. "Part of it was coming home, but it was just something I always wanted — to be in a rural community," Smith says. "It's just more independent that way, you have to rely more on your own abilities because you don't have a lot of resources around you."

Smith is joined in his office by two physician assistants, Monica Saenz-Castillo and Christie Ambriz. Together, they provide a full array of services. Smith has added to his toolkit to help minimize patients' medical expenses when possible.



Dr. Albert Smith goes over some patient notes as he walks down the hallway in his practice.

He's earned the necessary accreditations to perform echocardiograms and colonoscopies in his office.

He used to refer his patients to the nearest gastrointestinal specialist for colonoscopies, but that meant a 35-mile drive most of them couldn't afford. "If you have to drive a long way, you've got the price of gas and you've got time away from work," Smith says. "I went back for colonoscopy training and have been doing endoscopies here in the office for 30 years, full-fledged colonoscopy. I do one almost every day."

WITNESSING PROGRESS

Smith has seen a lot of changes in Willacy County, including the impact of strong and reliable broadband provided by VTX1. "Being born in Willacy County, I was a child at the inception of VTX1, although it was called Valley Telephone Cooperative at the time," he says.

Years ago, an old college friend brought his family to spend a week with Smith, his wife, Norine, and the couple's son, Aaron. Just as his friend was about to leave his Boston home for the visit, he got a call from his boss at a high-end computer company, telling him his skills were needed on a highly lucrative project. Smith assured his friend he would be able to access the internet from Willacy County, and says his friend's "jaw dropped" when he learned that Smith had a very fast DSL connection in his home.

"He said, 'You have DSL, and you're living in rural south Texas in the middle of nowhere,'" Smith recalls with a chuckle. "He said, 'We've heard of DSL, we're waiting for it, but we don't have it in the Research Triangle of Boston.' We now have fiber optic internet at our house, and Allen, I think, still doesn't have fiber internet at his house in Boston."

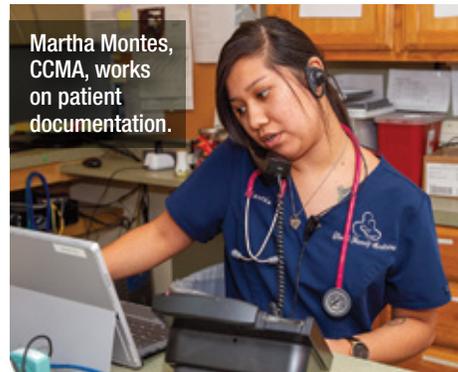
Smith also has VTX1's internet service at his office, where the staff uses it for everything from telephone service to storing patient records.

PUTTING PEOPLE BEFORE PROFITS

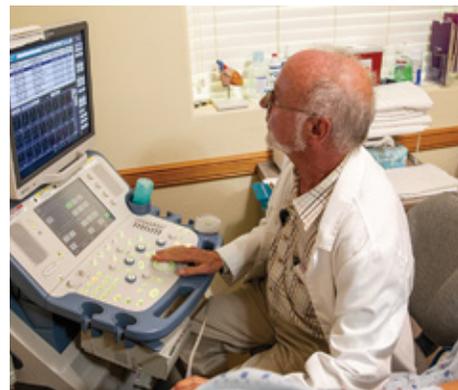
Being a physician in a small rural community isn't as lucrative as many might think. "It's really difficult," Smith says, adding that changes in reimbursement laws and the expanded influence of insurance companies has led many small-town physicians to take their

skills to big cities. "You can make a living, but you can't make a living like you do in a bigger city or cosmopolitan area. It's hard to make anywhere near the same kind of income."

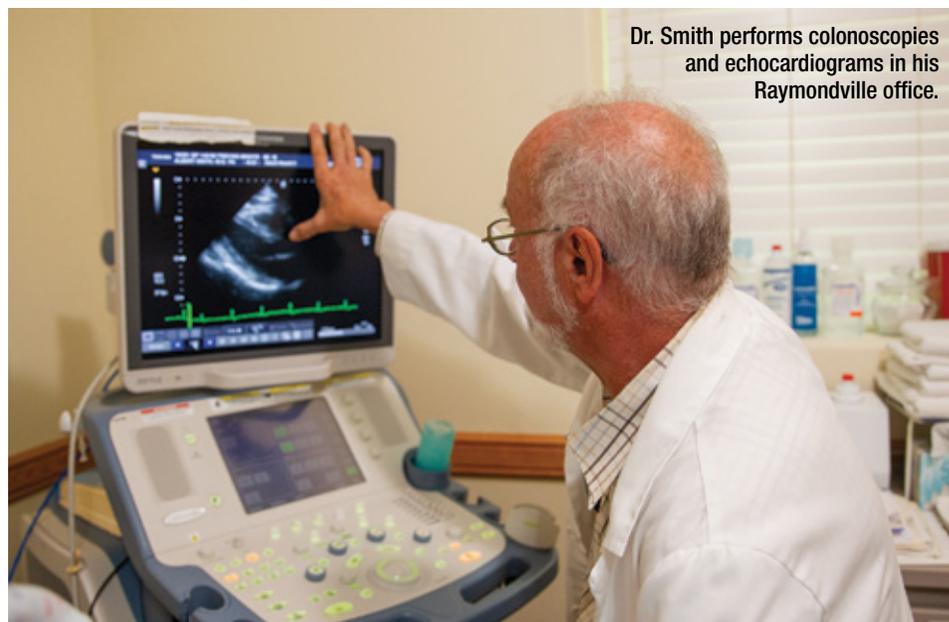
But Smith values his connection with his patients and his passion for his field as highly as he does a paycheck. "I never went into medicine because of the money," he says. "I went into it because I enjoyed the profession." 📞



Martha Montes, CCMA, works on patient documentation.



Dr. Smith performs colonoscopies and echocardiograms in his Raymondville office.



Ooey gooey chewy — Pizza

Warm up a cold day with a perfect slice

Daniele Panella, a former culinary teacher at New York University and now an accomplished personal chef in Austin, well remembers his first attempt at making pizza.

“I was 18, and it was a complete disaster,” he recalls. “I burned the crust. Wood-fired ovens take a lot of time and testing to get used to.”

But he tried again, and soon he found himself in his hometown of Florence, Italy, conducting cooking classes and catering private dinners and special events. Once he landed on American soil, he started teaching his students at NYU the art and secrets of Italian cooking using techniques he learned from his father.

“He was my earliest and biggest influence in the kitchen,” Panella says. “He was so creative and would make pizza, pies and lasagna every weekend.”

The family didn’t have a lot of money to spend on food, but what they did have was a lot of love and knowledge for what goes into a healthy meal. “One of my favorite memories is going to the market on the corner and picking the freshest ingredients with my father and going home and making the most beautiful eggplant parmigiana,” he says.

And it was this inherited passion that inspired Panella to master many Italian classics, pizza among them.

Panella teaches cooking classes in Austin and says his pizza class is one of the favorites. And before his students leave, they’ll know all about the proofing process when making an artisan pizza crust. “Some people have trouble proofing the yeast,” he says. They’re confused as to how many hours you should let the pizza dough rise and how much yeast to put in. I see some recipes that tell you to use as much as 2 1/2 tablespoons of yeast per pound of flour. That is way too



Chef Daniele Panella

much! I suggest using 4 cups of flour and no more than 1/4 of a teaspoon of regular yeast.

“And it takes patience. Dough is definitely a baking product, and as such, you have to be as scientific as possible. It’s really a labor of love — something you have to be passionate about to get it done correctly.”

But it doesn’t take a lot of fancy equipment to do it right. A pizza stone makes a good investment, along with a pizza peel, measuring cups, bowls and lots of elbow grease.



FOOD EDITOR
ANNE P. BRALY
IS A NATIVE OF
CHATTANOOGA,
TENNESSEE.

Here are some more tips Panella says are good to remember when making a pizza from scratch:

- Use flour with a high gluten content — 12 to 14%. Bread flour does a nice job.
- Use the best plain crushed or pureed tomato sauce you can find. Mix 16 ounces of sauce with one tablespoon of extra virgin olive oil, four or five chopped basil leaves, and salt and pepper, to taste. This makes a good pizza sauce.
- If you’re using it for a margherita pizza or other pizzas, cut the mozzarella into 3-inch-long strips and place them in a colander with a weight on top of them and a bowl below the colander. Let the mozzarella drain in the refrigerator for one hour before baking. This will prevent most of the water released by the cheese from ending up in the pizza, which makes it a soggy mess.
- Make your own pizza peel with two semicircles cut from cutboard or by using two small plastic cutting boards. That way, you can easily release the pizza on the stone without messing up the toppings.
- Use a pizza stone, and put it in the oven before turning it on. Allow the stone to heat up for at least 30 minutes before you start baking.
- Instantly cover your pizza with a pot or a pan for 3 to 5 minutes after it is cooked. This will allow the crust to soften, yielding a pizza crust that is crunchy on the edges and chewy inside.



Artisan Pizza

Though this is not Panella's recipe, it's a good one for beginners.

- 3 cups plus 3 tablespoons lukewarm water (100 F or below)
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 1 tablespoon granulated yeast
- 1 1/2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 7 1/2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour

Combine warm water, olive oil, yeast and salt in a 5-quart bowl, preferably a lidded, but not airtight, plastic container. Measure the flour using a "scoop and sweep" method. Reach into the flour bin with your measuring cup, scoop up a full measure all at once, and sweep it level with a knife. Mix until all of the flour is incorporated (kneading is not

necessary) using a wooden spoon or a food processor with a dough attachment. Cover with a non-airtight lid. Allow to rise at room temperature for 2 hours. Do not punch down. You want to retain as much gas in the dough as possible. A reduction in gas will make your pizzas and flatbreads dense. Refrigerate and use over the next 14 days. Refrigerate at least 3 hours before using.

To make: A half-hour before you're ready to bake, place a pizza stone in the bottom third of the oven and heat it at your oven's highest temperature. Prepare and organize your toppings. Dust a pizza peel or a large cutting board/flat cookie sheet with enough flour or cornmeal to easily transfer the pizza over to the hot stone. Pull up and cut off a 1/2-pound (orange-size) piece of dough.

Using a little flour (enough so it won't stick to your fingers), stretch and shape the dough into a ball. Sprinkle your work area with a little flour. Using your hands or a rolling pin, roll out and stretch the dough until it is approximately 1/8-inch thick and 12 inches wide.

Place the finished dough onto the prepared pizza peel. Then, add the toppings of your choice. Carefully slide the pizza onto the hot stone. If it isn't sliding, sprinkle more flour or cornmeal between the pizza and the pizza peel until the pizza moves. Check for doneness after 8-10 minutes — it may take a few minutes longer. Turn the pizza around if one side is browning faster than the other. Allow to cool slightly on a wire rack before serving. 📺



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