

## **Digital Inclusion Plan Summary**

Dalton Telephone Company (DTC) dba Highline proposed broadband fiber project will ensure the Village of Lodgepole access to a robust and reliable broadband internet option and will establish and upgrade broadband infrastructure to the many underserved households throughout the community. This grant opportunity and investment will allow residents in the project area the ability to upgrade to 1 Gbps/1Gbps. The lack of access to reliable and fast internet impedes community members ability to access job opportunities, vital telehealth and healthcare needs, online educational resources, and furthers digital inequity for all affected.

## **Students and Education Equity**

DTC has recognized that Lodgepole, along with many other rural Nebraska communities, suffer from a lack of connectivity that worsens digital inequity. By having access to higher broadband speeds, households can participate in distance learning programs and accommodate remote learning. Additionally, older students close to completing their secondary educational years are often submitting college and financial aid applications, or to secure future employment opportunities. For many residents in rural areas, broadband access is a necessity.

The implementation of Lodgepole's broadband project will make it easier for students to complete assignments, participate in E-learning days, and thrive within and outside of the community. Better broadband will also make it easier for the faculty to teach and proctor exams online without unnecessary distractions, interruptions and risking exposure to COVID-19.

High-speed, reliable Internet will make it easier for adults to obtain access to online learning to pursue and participate in post-graduate education programs or further job certifications online. As we know, the days of paper applications are far behind us. Many jobs require that applicants apply to positions online and send an electronic copy of your resume. This is impossible without adequate, reliable broadband service. DTC's project will increase the abilities for the residents in Lodgepole to have access to reliable service that in turn will increase the chances for residents to find better jobs.

## **Economic Improvement and Development**

Access to faster broadband speeds will help economic development by providing more growth opportunities for businesses already located in Lodgepole and attracting new, young talent to help fill and create more jobs. Local businesses are struggling to remain competitive without access to much-needed connections and, therefore, cannot offer local residents employment opportunities. Additionally, providing high-speed, reliable broadband will allow residents to explore jobs outside of Lodgepole and telework opportunities.

In general, improved internet access will make the community a more comfortable and successful place to live and work, along with attracting more businesses and larger employment opportunities. Furthermore, it would create more opportunities for residents to work from home, benefiting citizens and rural companies alike by reducing overhead expenses, creating a larger base of qualified employees, and reducing turnover.

## Improving Residents Quality of Life

The lack of adequate broadband service in Lodgepole during the COVID-19 Pandemic illuminated the importance of digital knowledge and access to reliable internet. Many residents were forced to work remotely from home. With higher broadband speeds the people of Lodgepole will have access to live their daily lives, provide for their families, and stay connected to the world. Working adults will be able to sufficiently work from home and those who go to school will be able to continue their education.

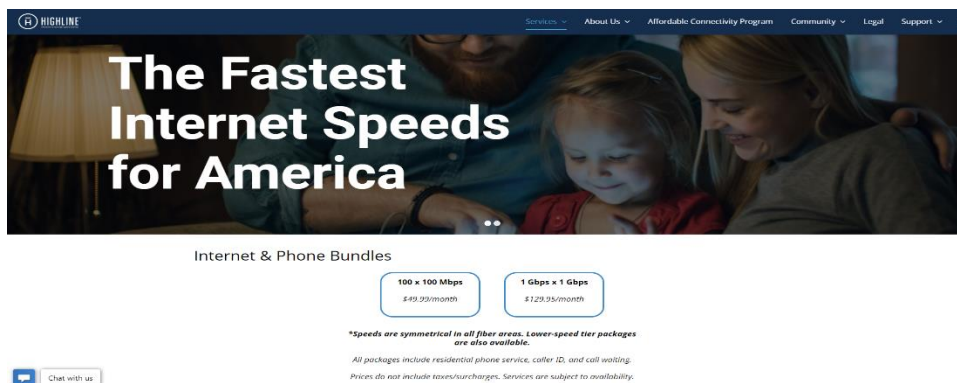
## Healthcare Services and Telehealth

Access to healthcare is critical. Reliable broadband is crucial for access to good healthcare and a strong telehealth network. The proposed service area is rural, making it difficult for residents to schedule and physically attend doctor's appointments prior to and during COVID-19. High-speed broadband will allow physicians to provide rural patients with online services, eliminating the challenges involved with taking off work or driving long distances to see a doctor. Additionally, a telehealth network would provide residents with access to specialists otherwise limited by geography. This is critical for the most rural areas of our country. Finally, improved broadband will help maintain upgraded and accurate patient health records allowing doctors to better monitor patients from home through telehealth.

## Addressing Affordability

DTC understands that oftentimes rural communities have a more difficult time affording high speed internet and some households will sacrifice reliability for affordability. DTC participates in the ACP Program and Lifeline Service program. Discounts for both voice and broadband internet are applied to the accounts of qualified customers.

## ACP Info



The screenshot shows the Highline website's 'Internet & Phone Bundles' section. The header features the Highline logo and navigation links: Services, About Us, Affordable Connectivity Program, Community, Legal, and Support. The main content area has a dark background with a family photo and the text 'The Fastest Internet Speeds for America'. Below this, two bundle options are listed: '100 x 100 Mbps' for \$49.99/month and '1 Gbps x 1 Gbps' for \$129.95/month. A note states: '\*Speeds are symmetrical in all fiber areas. Lower-speed tier packages are also available.' A footer note reads: 'All packages include residential phone service, caller ID, and call waiting. Prices do not include taxes/charges. Services are subject to availability.' A 'Chat with us' button is visible in the bottom left corner.

DTC has participated in the ACP program since December 31, 2021. The program allows for:

- Up to \$30 per month toward internet service for eligible households
- Up to \$75 per month for households on qualifying Tribal lands

Eligible households can also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers if they contribute more than \$10 and less than \$50 toward the purchase price.

The Affordable Connectivity Program is limited to one monthly service discount and one device discount per household.

**Eligibility is as follows: A household is eligible if a member of the household meets at least one of the criteria below:**

- Has an income that is at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines; or
- Participates in certain assistance programs, such as SNAP, Medicaid, Federal Public Housing Assistance, SSI, WIC, or Lifeline;
- Participates in Tribal specific programs, such as Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance, Tribal TANF, or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations;
- Is approved to receive benefits under the free and reduced-price school lunch program or the school breakfast program, including through the USDA Community Eligibility Provision in the 2019-2020, 2020-2021, or 2021-2022 school year;
- Received a Federal Pell Grant during the current award year; or
- Meets the eligibility criteria for a participating provider's existing low-income program.

**To apply, the ACP Application is a two-step process:**

1. Go to [ACPBenefit.org](https://ACPBenefit.org) to submit an application or print out a mail-in application.
2. Contact your preferred participating provider to select a service plan and have the discount applied to your bill.

### **Lifeline Service to Dalton Telephone Company Customers**

To ensure underserved, low-income customers have access to effective broadband communications capabilities, Dalton Telephone Company provides Lifeline Service to eligible customers. As set forth by the Nebraska Public Service Commission, the Lifeline discount is provided one-per-eligible-household.

A household is eligible for the Lifeline discount if annual household income is at or below 135% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (dependent on the number of members in the household), or if members of the household (or their children) receive state or federal benefits. These eligible benefits include:

1. Medicaid
2. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
3. Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
4. Federal Public Housing Assistance (FPHA)
5. Veterans or Survivors Pension Benefit
6. Children's Health Insurance Programs (CHIP – Kids Connection, SAM, MAC, and EMAC) (State- only discount)

Eligible/qualifying customers can receive a \$9.25 discount toward internet service or a \$7.25 discount toward standalone voice service, per month. The \$9.25 discount can also be applied to a bundle with internet (which meets the minimum service standards). An additional state-level

discount of \$3.50 is available, and an additional Lifeline Area Discount may be available, based upon service location.

Lifeline Service is available to all residential customers who meet the requirements.

Ways to apply: Lifeline Service, contact Dalton Telephone Company at (866) 542-6779, or the Nebraska Public Service Commission at (800) 526-0017.

### **Marketing and Outreach**

DTC has multiple levels of marketing and outreach to the community of Lodgepole. DTC's staff is involved throughout the community in gathering support for this project and participate in community events. DTC's staff is in contact with community leaders and community support letters are being sent to [psc.broadband@nebraska.gov](mailto:psc.broadband@nebraska.gov).

Marketing efforts prior to construction consist of letters sent to households to inform them of the construction in their community and to "pardon the dust" while we complete the project.

Marketing efforts near completion/post completion consist of yard signs with DTC dba Highline contact information and internet advertising. DTC's staff visit each home and place a door hanger with information about internet offerings and ways to sign up. DTC begins a direct mailing campaign with individual postcards sent to each home with information about internet offerings and ways to sign up.