



## Fiber: Important To Your City's Economic Health

**PAGE 5**

### IN THIS ISSUE

*Health I.T., Rural Broadband,  
and Common Sense* | **8**

*PEG Tripod Needs Three Legs;  
May Be Lifeboats for Big  
Media's Sinking Ships* | **10**

*Crossing the Digital Divide* | **13**



# Health I.T., Rural Broadband, and Common Sense

By Frank Odasz

**H**ealth I.T. as related to consumer empowerment in the knowledge age is much more than simply connecting doctor's offices and establishing electronic health records. How consumers can learn to take charge of their own wellness best practices, as well as best practices for keeping costs to a minimum, requires a more careful assessment of the integrated aspects of the online activities of citizens on behalf of personal and community wellness.

Without question, healthcare practitioners and patients need electronic access to personal health records. The trends in social media suggest email between consumers, health care providers, and pharmacists can help keep costs down and can streamline effective communications. Free two-way video services are already available to anyone with a fast Internet connection. The range and utility of home monitoring medical devices is growing rapidly.

Online prescription orders and online discount purchasing of

medications can reduce costs significantly. Consumers definitely need more choices as to who they choose for healthcare, but also regarding their daily health-related behaviors and information resources.

Local posting of community health-related resources should include online personal health resources, such as Microsoft's Health Vault, [www.healthvault.com](http://www.healthvault.com) and Google's new health resource, [www.google.com/health](http://www.google.com/health)

Local communities need to identify local mentors able to assist

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those new to using the Internet for access to these and more specific resources such as disease specific support groups, government services of all types, and more. Such mentors could easily be trained seniors in coordination with community service programs – earning their monthly health insurance premiums by assisting others finding highly specific information and E-Government services.

Social media can be used to engage and train home healthcare agents and consumers. Social isolation is directly related to record suicide levels, particularly in remote Alaskan villages. Peer generated content and virtual communities of interest have already proven to be highly dynamic cost-effective ways of creating and disseminating valuable content. Peer mediated skills transferred via social media e-learning has vast untapped potential, and the rapid growth and evolution of social media for identifying new ways to meet existing needs is apparent. (Ask any teenager on Myspace or Facebook.)

An Alaskan Telemed program providing behavioral counseling in rural Alaskan Native villages raises the question of where does community wellness training in socially dysfunctional communities begin and end? If the lack of an economy is part of the roots of depression and substance abuse, why would we not provide e-learning solutions to resolve the source of the socio-economic behavioral problems? To prohibit such educational access via Telemed systems contradicts the Hippocratic Oath.

E-rate funding (universal service fund) in the past has taken a silo

approach, authorizing separate broadband connections for health, and education, causing unused bandwidth to be wasted instead of shared – at the cost of the community wellness issues they were intended to assist. Some Alaskan villages have separate broadband connections for health, education, and business, due to federal policies, instead of sharing access in an economically sustainable model.

Telemedicine is often the first broadband link to many rural communities, but too often there lacks an understanding of the importance of intelligent integrated use of fast Internet connections for community wellness across the following nine essential areas: Safety; Health; Education; Entrepreneurship; Ecommerce/Telework; Social Services; Culture; Government; Entertainment. The role of E-Government systems is to provide the most integrated, cost-effective, efficient systems modern technology has made available, at our fingertips.

Health I.T. and broadband training best practices comprise 21st Century community wellness in an era of accelerating change, particularly in rural areas where the first broadband connections are often to the hospital only.

The dramatic health benefits of Telemed systems for entire communities require training for only those few Telemed professionals, whereas the broader community wellness benefits referenced above require citizen engagement in new knowledge and relationship-building to create the community-wide behavioral outcomes that sustainable communities will require in the 21st

Century. The ability to participate in civic life online, and to learn-to-learn online, and to learn-to-EARN, from anywhere, has everything to do with citizen and community wellness. ■

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