



Access to Telemedicine through Broadband Expansion Offers Veterans Needed Assistance

By Sophee Sanderson, ConnectLA

One thing that is critical for the Office of Broadband to address is the needs of our Louisiana service members.

Cajun Broadband, a veteran owned business and recipient of GUMBO funding, provides businesses and families with reliable and accessible internet, as well as phone service for a fair price. While the company started with just 10 customers in 2017, it now serves nearly 10,000 customers across seven Louisiana parishes.

Founders Chris Disher and Jimmy Lewis disclosed that the advantages of bringing reliable, high-speed internet to veterans increase their "work from home opportunities." Many disabled veterans join programs where they can learn a trade or skill, usually one that is web-based with high-speed internet, providing them the opportunity to receive further education, as well.

In addition, Lewis also revealed how evolving technology in broadband access assists veterans with receiving healthcare.

The Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has a great deal of telehealth opportunities. Instead of having to drive into town or to the local VA center, veterans with internet access can attend telehealth visits online.

Although convenient, this does come with some challenges, particularly where there may be a lack of resources or someone may be without a computer. However, this depends upon the age of the veteran; younger veterans may have access to these devices, whereas older veterans may not.

Chris Disher gave his thoughts on the importance of broadband:

"Broadband is essential for day-to-day life to do anything in the modern day. It used to be something that was just nice to have and a way to communicate with friends, but now it's essential for every single aspect of your life - banking, healthcare, schooling, connecting with your relatives," Disher said.

Veterans who don't have broadband access are at an extreme disadvantage. If a veteran lives in a rural community and doesn't have internet, they can't connect with family or friends or with the VA to apply for their benefits. They may have to go to a library to access the internet - a problem that is only becoming increasingly worse.

Many letters from the VA have become electronic, causing veterans without broadband to be at risk of missing doctor's appointments, medications, support services and other critical communication because they aren't connected.

Prior to telemedicine gaining attention, rural communities suffered with their hospitals, directly resulting in them losing some of their medical support. COVID-19 encouraged heart monitoring and wellness monitoring to be done remotely.

Cajun Broadband set up a lab at a local community center where people could sit in a chair that measures blood pressure and heart rate:

"It gives a live analysis of your health by using the computer, so you can't do it if you aren't connected. You need privacy and a secure network. Telemedicine would be the biggest assistance for veterans," Lewis said.

Lewis stated that if he could make recommendations to policymakers to improve broadband services for veterans, he would create a program like the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP).

Cajun Broadband gives discounts to veterans automatically, including free installation or providing educational services. One veteran, Johnny Broussard, shared how broadband services have helped him.

Access to broadband services has impacted Broussard's daily life as a veteran. For Broussard, video calls, emails and social media have all become faster and more reliable to perform basic functions necessary for daily activities through broadband services.

"The ability to connect instantly through social media or video calls brings us closer together. I have family members scattered across the U.S. and friends across the world which I contact daily. The reliability of broadband services has made that possible," Broussard said.

Broussard has also utilized broadband services to access resources such as VA Healthcare telehealth appointments, VA Home Loans, veterans benefits with merchants and the Military Service Buy Back Program for the Federal Retirement System. He has also found broadband services to be helpful when pursuing job opportunities, and he currently uses broadband services for virtual job training and remote work opportunities.

Broadband services have also helped Broussard with VA Healthcare telehealth appointments, which have significantly reduced the amount he would have been spent travelling to in-person visits.

Looking forward, Broussard shared how he thinks advancements in broadband technology could further benefit veterans and their families:

"Having reliable broadband service greatly reduces the gaps in support or resources for veterans from a convenience and ease of access to resources standpoint. It definitely reduces the need for travel for local VA services. As veterans like me get older, broadband technology for use with video based telehealth services will become increasingly important," Broussard said.

"Advancements in broadband technology can enhance access to virtual healthcare visits. Broadband access is extremely important for me to participate in online courses and certifications for career advancements as a federal employee. Broadband advancements will enable me and other older veterans to stay connected with family, friends and support networks through video calls, social media, and online communities especially those of us with mobility issues or living in rural areas," he said.

In addition to solving broadband challenges for veterans like Broussard, Governor Jeff Landry's Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs is working on a new Louisiana 501(C)(3) veteran service organization called the BOOT, which will officially launch in August, to recruit and retain transitioning military and veterans from across the United States.

BOOT will play a role just as important as broadband connectivity to ensure Louisiana's veterans have the digital skill set to take advantage of what better internet services will provide to them.

Click [here](#) to learn more about Cajun Broadband.