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Small Cable Operators Push Through Pandemic Challenges

While there was “great concern” in Washington and across the country as the coronavirus pandemic started that broadband networks would not be able to meet the “incredible surge in usage” caused by millions more people being at home during the day, the networks have performed well, ACA President Matthew Polka said during an interview for C-SPAN’s *The Communicators* program to air Saturday and Monday.

“Because of the ability that our members have had for the last four years to invest, to innovate and deploy, to use new and alternative technologies, they were actually preparing to meet this pandemic before it even happened,” he said. “And once we were in the pandemic situation, the broadband networks, because of that investment and innovation and deployment, were actually ready to meet the need.”

ACA found through a survey of its members’ network performance that there “was capacity to spare,” despite the increased demand, Mr. Polka said.

“Our members were ready and able to meet that need, and continue to do so today,” he said.

Small cable companies “just jumped into the middle of the pandemic,” realizing that, “We need to keep people connected,” Mr. Polka said.

The ability of small cable companies to help people remain connected during the pandemic has been “an untold story, a great story,” he argued.

Pandemic issues aside, ACA continues to press the case that small cable companies face different challenges than larger broadband companies, Mr. Polka said.

“There is a difference between providing broadband, phone, and cable service in densely populated urban areas versus areas where [small providers operate],” he said. “These are very, very remote places. But ... it costs the same to build that same mile of broadband, phone, or Internet service.”

The group’s message to lawmakers, he said, is, “Look, we’re with you on serving rural areas with rural broadband services. But you have to understand how our members differ [from] those larger providers that serve urban areas.”

ACA's main task, he said, continues to be "saying to Washington, 'We're here to work with you hand in hand. We will help you. We live and work in these areas. Work with us and understand our differences and we'll make sure to get these problems solved together.'"

During the same program, Patricia Joy Boyers, president of Missouri-based Boycom Vision, echoed Mr. Polka's view that small cable companies have been able to successfully weather the pandemic.

While, she said, "Nobody wants a challenge quite like we had with the pandemic," the company has managed to improve its network over the past year.

"We didn't go home," she said. "We saddled up and we went to work. ... We literally had to lean into the pandemic because our networks were going to be challenged."

Boycom found "creative ways" to augment its network, such as splitting nodes and adding more cable, to provide better service for customers, Ms. Boyers said.

In addition to dealing with ensuring its network infrastructure could hold up, the company had to adjust to other challenges, such as establishing policies for how to keep technicians and customers safe during service calls, she noted.

Among other things, Ms. Boyers praised the Zoom video conferencing service has been a "great equalizer" that has become invaluable during the pandemic.

"It's allowed us to stay connected to one another," she said. "It's allowed us to continue to do business. It's also allowed us to be creative and come up with innovative ways to stay connected to the [ACA], to our legislators, to just about everyone."

Ms. Boyers also credited the current FCC, including Chairman Ajit Pai, for having a "light touch" on regulation and reversing past "burdensome" regulations that helped create an environment that enabled companies to attract capital investment so they could improve their networks.

There is a "scorecard now" to show that was the right approach.

"If there were ever a test that was passed with a straight 'A,' it was the networks of the independent providers during this pandemic," she said. —Jeff Williams

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