

A man and a woman are standing in a warehouse. The man is on the left, wearing a red polo shirt and blue jeans, with his hands in his pockets. The woman is on the right, wearing a white floral shirt and light-colored pants, leaning on a black equipment case. The background shows warehouse shelving and equipment.

BTC Fiber

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2023

CONNECTION

Team collaboration

Minnesota business
expands to Pikeville

GOAL FOR
100% FIBER

CUSTOMER SUPPORT
SPECIALISTS



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO

NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Building the broadband workforce

Partnerships prepare for future growth

As we greet the new year, it's natural to look ahead to the next 12 months, which will again show our members supporting rural America by providing critical broadband internet service. It has been gratifying to see providers like yours working so furiously to build out broadband to communities still waiting for robust service while also serving existing customers. Yet, the work is never truly done.

Whether it is installations, upgrades or maintenance, there is certainly more than enough work to go around. That is why it is fitting that NTCA is stepping up to help broadband workers. Because retention and recruitment in rural markets is more challenging than urban areas, we are especially proud to work with some new partners to support the broadband providers we represent in creating a 21st century workforce.

We recently joined the White House's Talent Pipeline Challenge, a call to action for employers, education and training providers, and others to support equitable workforce development in critical infrastructure sectors like broadband. We have partnered with Northwood Technical College, the National Rural Education Association and the Communications Workers of America to expand training and job opportunities for rural America's broadband workforce.

These efforts seek to prepare for immediate growth in the broadband industry because of significant funding for network deployment in the Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act, as well as future demand for high-tech jobs.

It's an exciting time to work in broadband, and you are fortunate to live somewhere served by a committed community-based provider. As connections grow, so will the number and skills of broadband workers. Stay tuned for more information soon from your provider about these initiatives.

Happy New Year. 🍀

A nourishing change

FCC embraces new broadband labels

Rural broadband providers have a deserved reputation for openness, but not every national company can say the same — shopping for service can be trying.

The Federal Communications Commission, however, intends to require internet providers to prominently display a “nutrition label” clearly detailing the specifics of each plan. The FCC passed a rule late last year clearing the way for this change, although implementation may take time and require additional input.

The intent is to eliminate hidden fees, confusion about data caps and uncertainty about speeds and generally to shine a bright light on what can be a confusing choice.

Each label will show key information — details wise consumers should consider now:

- Monthly price and contract length
- Whether that price will change after a certain period and, if so, what it will change to
- A complete list of monthly and one-time fees, as well as any early termination fee
- Whether the company participates in the Affordable Connectivity Program and a link to check if the consumer qualifies
- Typical download and upload speeds
- Data cap and price for exceeding that cap
- And more

The FCC must complete additional steps before implementing this change, and internet service providers will have time to update websites and other sales material. 📱

THE INFORMATION YOU NEED

The FCC is working to limit confusion about broadband services by creating a “nutrition label” providers must display to consumers. While implementation might take time, the example label provided by the FCC offers a guide to information shoppers might consider now when choosing a service.

Broadband Facts	
Provider Name	
Service Plan Name and/or Speed Tier	
Fixed or Mobile Broadband Consumer Disclosure	
Monthly Price	[\$]
This Monthly Price [is/is not] an introductory rate. [If introductory rate is applicable, identify length of introductory period and the rate that will apply after introductory period concludes]	
This Monthly Price [does not] require[s] a [x year/x month] contract. [only required if applicable; if so, provide link to terms of contract]	
Additional Charges & Terms	
Provider Monthly Fees	[\$]
One-time Fees at the Time of Purchase	[\$]
Early Termination Fee	[\$]
Government Taxes	Varies by Location
Discounts & Bundles	
Click Here for available billing discounts and pricing options for broadband service bundled with other services like video, phone, and wireless service, and use of your own equipment like modems and routers. [Any links to such discounts and pricing options on the provider's website must be provided in this section.]	
Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)	
The ACP is a government program to help lower the monthly cost of internet service. To learn more about the ACP, including to find out whether you qualify, visit affordableconnectivity.gov .	
Participates in the ACP	[Yes/No]
Speeds Provided with Plan	
Typical Download Speed	[] Mbps
Typical Upload Speed	[] Mbps
Typical Latency	[] ms
Data Included with Monthly Price	[] GB
Charges for Additional Data Usage	[\$/GB]
Network Management	Read our Policy
Privacy	Read our Policy
Customer Support	
Contact Us: example.com/support/ / (555) 555-5555	
Learn more about the terms used on this label by visiting the Federal Communications Commission's Consumer Resource Center.	
fcc.gov/consumer	
[Unique Plan Identifier Ex. F0005937974123ABC456EMC789]	

GONE PHISHING

Don't get hooked by a ransomware attack



If you lost access to everything on your personal or work computer, how much would you pay to get it back? It's a question more people are asking themselves as ransomware attacks have continued to grow in number and severity.

About 21% of all cyberattacks in 2021 were ransomware attacks, according to IBM Security, costing individuals and businesses an estimated \$20 billion. From 2013 to 2020, the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center saw a 243% increase in ransomware reports. That growth comes thanks to services that offer ransomware-for-hire and the increased popularity of cryptocurrency, which make untraceable payments to these services easier than ever.

The FBI does not recommend victims of these attacks pay the ransom. Victims rarely see their data returned, and payment only encourages future attacks. Instead, the best protection against ransomware is to understand how it works, where it comes from and how to protect your data from the start.

WHAT IS RANSOMWARE?

Ransomware is a type of malware, or malicious software, which locks the victim

out of data on their computer until they pay for access to be restored. Most ransomware attacks target individuals, although attacks on large organizations with even bigger payouts have grown in popularity.

In the past, these situations largely involved attackers demanding a ransom to unlock the data. Today, most are "double extortion" assaults in which attackers demand payment for returning the data and to prevent it from being stolen again.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

Ransomware can infect your computer in many of the same ways as any other virus:


- **Phishing emails** — These emails trick users into downloading a malicious attachment disguised as a harmless file or visiting a website that can download the ransomware through their browsers.
- **Software vulnerabilities** — Hackers can find holes in a piece of software's cybersecurity protection or buy information on these flaws to download the malware onto a device or network.
- **Stolen logins** — Whether they're obtained through phishing, purchased on the dark web or hacked by brute force,

stolen credentials give cybercriminals direct access to download malware onto a device.

- **Repurposed malware** — Some ransomware is actually malware developed for other attacks like stealing bank information, and it's reworked to encrypt and lock personal data.

HOW CAN I AVOID IT?

Since paying attackers is not a reliable way to deal with ransomware, the best defense is to protect yourself and your devices before an attack can begin:

- Keep backups of any important data to eliminate most of the leverage an attacker might have.
- Update your computer's software and operating system regularly to protect against the latest threats.
- Update your computer's cybersecurity tools to help response teams detect and react to new ransomware attacks faster.
- Always be aware of phishing, social engineering and other strategies that can lead to a ransomware attack. 

TO LEARN MORE, visit www.stopthinkconnect.org.

Are you ready for the future?

Embrace 2023 and beyond

Happy New Year! This is always an exciting time, because in so many ways the months ahead seem like a fresh canvas waiting to be filled with plans, hopes, dreams, accomplishments and more. But if you're like many of us, a little bit of 2022 may linger.



CHARLIE BORING
CEO

Maybe it's that credit card bill showing holiday purchases, some unfinished to-dos or paperwork needed for the march toward filing taxes, but last year's odds and ends tend to stick around. Really, how things went in the previous 12 months can inform how you approach 2023 because we rarely start completely fresh.

For example, as a business, our past performance informs us about our budget, the status of our infrastructure and the well-being of our staff. That's just a start, too. I imagine it's the same for most of you.

But, what if you relied on future-proof tools and strategies as a foundation you know will work not only today but for the next year? Even better, what if that system adapted as the rest of your life changes — a bigger family, a more demanding job or whatever else comes your way? You're ready.

Well, for us at BTC Fiber that bedrock system does exist. We've invested in core technologies that are as future-proof as possible. Naturally, I'm talking about our fiber optic internet network, which is a true wonder woven throughout our community. Consider this: A single strand of optical glass fiber is three times stronger than steel and more durable than copper. It's still flexible, though. And, no matter the distance traveled, the quality of the digital signal doesn't diminish.

As you know, there are immediate benefits for every home and business connected to this lightning-fast internet network. From telehealth and work-from-home opportunities to digital music and streaming videos, fiber provides a conduit to the tools and resources you deserve.


Those are the realities of today. Now, what about tomorrow? This is where an already exciting technology becomes even more magical. Fiber optic technology is built to stand the test of time.

Our network already provides performance rivaling that found in metropolitan areas. That's today.

Changes happen fast. From connected TVs, appliances, home security systems and more, internet usage is only increasing. Fortunately, fiber has the capacity to grow along with the demand. Upgrades, maintenance and more will certainly be required, but that core technology is ready for the future.

Those fiber optic cables are tiny but powerful, which is why we've made a significant investment in the fiber serving you so well. We know it's also capable of growing to meet our needs. Faster speed. More overall capacity. We're ready for the online tools, services and new devices only now being dreamed up.

So, as BTC Fiber heads into 2023 and we wrap up the final few details from last year, we know the foundation is solid. We can confidently go forward with excitement and anticipation. Our investments of the past will pay dividends.

Best of all, we are taking this journey with you. I hope you're as excited about what comes next as we are. 

BTC Fiber

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is a member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people of Bledsoe and Sequatchie counties and portions of Van Buren, Rhea, Cumberland and Hamilton counties.

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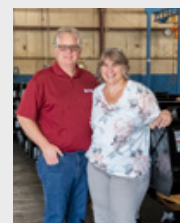
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On the Cover:



Dean and Lois Virnig established Virnig Manufacturing in 1989 and added the Pikeville location in 2021.

See story Page 8.

Photo by Mark Gilliland



Attention HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS!

BTC Fiber, in partnership with NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association, will soon award annual scholarships.

These include the \$2,000 Foundation for Rural Service Scholarship, to which BTC Fiber will add \$500 for a total award of \$2,500.

FRS Scholarship applicants are also eligible to be considered for a named scholarship. One \$7,000 Everett Kneece Scholarship, four \$5,000 JSI Staurulakis Family Scholarships, one \$1,500 TMS Scholarship and three \$500 Roger Alan Cox Memorial Scholarships will be awarded.

Applications can be downloaded at frs.org and must be submitted online at frs.org by Feb. 8, 2023.

BTC Fiber named to Best of the Best

The readers voted, and the results are in! For the second year in a row, BTC Fiber was voted a top-three finalist for best internet service provider in the Chattanooga Times Free Press's Best of the Best awards for 2022.

This recognition comes as BTC Fiber builds a fiber optic network that will result in stronger connections, the ability to provide speeds faster than 1 gigabit per second and improve the quality of life throughout its service area. The goal is to have a 100% fiber-to-the-home network completed by 2024.

"We are honored to receive this recognition two years in a row," BTC Fiber CEO Charlie Boring says.

To learn more about BTC Fiber and check for service availability in your area, visit btcfiber.com.

Need help paying for your broadband service? See if you qualify for assistance

Did you know help is available in covering the cost of phone and internet services for eligible households?

BTC Fiber is proud to participate in two different government assistance programs administered by the Federal Communications Commission.

LIFELINE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

What is it?

Lifeline is a government assistance program dedicated to making phone and internet services more affordable for low-income households. This benefit provides eligible consumers a \$5.25 monthly discount for local voice-only telephone service and a \$9.25 monthly discount for stand-alone broadband internet access service or broadband service as part of a bundled package.

Who is eligible?

Customers who have an annual household income at or below 135% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines for a household of its size OR who participate in any of the following low-income assistance programs:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as Food Stamps
- Medicaid
- Supplemental Security Income
- Federal public housing assistance
- Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit

Learn more at lifelinesupport.org/get-started.

AFFORDABLE CONNECTIVITY PROGRAM

What is it?

The Affordable Connectivity Program is a Federal Communications Commission program that helps low-income households pay for internet service. The program provides a monthly discount on internet service of up to \$30 per eligible household.

Who is eligible?

A household is eligible if one 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

- 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

Learn more at acpbenefit.org or bledsoe.net/support.

NOTE: BTC Fiber is not responsible for determining who qualifies for these programs or who receives assistance. Consumers must meet specific criteria in order to obtain assistance with their local telephone and/or broadband service, and qualification is dependent upon government-established guidelines.

Brighten the winter

Plan now to cruise this year



Story by ANNE BRALY

When the days are cold, sun-down seems to arrive in the middle of the afternoon and skies are gray, there's no better time to turn daydreams of warm breezes, blue water and sand into reality. You might even save a little money while you're at it.

Cruising the Caribbean is a temptation thousands of people can't resist, and planning now can make a difference. "All of the major cruise lines have returned their fleets to full deployment," says Wes Rowland, president of cruiseexperts.com. "Cruising is back."

As a result, more cruise lovers are going to be on the water, and finding a deal for the best rooms and views is getting harder. There's so much to decide — dates, itineraries, cruise lines, room types and more. One of the first considerations is the port of origin. Fortunately, Southerners have options. In

Florida, you'll find ports in Tampa, Port Canaveral and Miami. Or, you can set sail from Charleston, South Carolina, or New Orleans. Even Galveston, Texas, can be a short, affordable flight away.

"It helps if you can find an experienced and trusted travel professional who can help you navigate the variables of a cruise purchase, understand your needs and expectations, help interpret value and give good guidance so you can make an informed decision in your best interest," Wes says.

The best cruise deals are not only about getting the lowest price. Cruise lines now offer attractive options, including amenities that once cost extra. Check out some of the top cruise sites online and you'll find that cruises now include more in the up-front price, such as beverage packages, tips, free specialty dining and Wi-Fi.

"It's a better value for the guest," Wes says. "Cruise lines took advantage of the unplanned downtime during the pandemic to retire the oldest ships from their fleets. With new ships coming on line, consumers have better choices of fabulous, amenity-packed ships than ever."

For example, Norwegian's 2023 schedule includes a seven-night cruise of the Western Caribbean, April 9-16, 2023, in a suite with a balcony for \$899 per person with double occupancy. The offer includes unlimited bar, a specialty dining experience, excursions and Wi-Fi.

CONSIDER 'SHOULDER SEASON'

Supply and demand determine rates, so if your travel dates are flexible take advantage of what budget cruisers consider the Holy Grail of deals — shoulder season. This window between the peak

blues



With cruises booking up for spring, planning now will help you find the adventure and pricing you want. So brighten the winter gloom with dreams of the sea.


and off-seasons, from late September through mid-November, offers the best deals and smaller crowds. “Sometimes it’s just the perception of when it’s better or worse to travel. You need to know what your priorities are,” Wes says.

TIPS FOR BUYING A CRUISE

If you choose to go it alone, do your homework. There’s no guarantee you’ll find the lowest rate, but these tips from cruiseexpert.com will help you be smarter about buying your vacation:

- Final deposits are due three months before the cruise. Usually, that’s the last date a cruise can be canceled without a penalty. This is when you can snag a good deal as cruise lines slash rates to try to fill empty cabins.
- Book for fall or spring when most families with school-age children cannot travel. There’s typically more

availability, and lower pricing, during these times.

- If you’re willing to risk it, book a Caribbean cruise during hurricane season when prices are much lower. Just be sure to invest in travel insurance and make sure your prepaid deposits and other expenses are covered.
- Aggregate sites — independent websites offering trips on multiple cruise lines — allow you to check out many options at once. Sites include cruisecritic.com, gotosea.com, cruises.com and cheapcruises.com.
- If you’re new to cruising and want to see if it’s right for you, try taking a short, two- to three-night cruise first. Royal Caribbean’s recently refurbished Freedom of the Seas is one option. It makes short cruises between Miami and the Bahamas. 

Ready to set sail?

As cruise season is back and moving full steam ahead, here are some of the newest vessels sailing the high seas:

- ▶ Royal Caribbean's Odyssey of the Seas embarked on its first cruise in 2021 and is the first Quantum Ultra-Class Ship in North America offering bumper cars, glow-in-the-dark laser tag and virtual reality games. Passengers can kick back and relax beside the newly designed, resort-style pool. This ship is a game-changer for the cruise industry.
- ▶ Princess Cruises' Enchanted Princess launched in 2019 and offers a touch more sophistication than ships geared toward the teenage set. Dining options are excellent on all the cruise line's Medallion Class vessels, the category to which the Enchanted Princess belongs.
- ▶ MSC Cruises' Virtuosa set sail in 2019. There's a humanoid robot bartender in the Starship Club. The ship has the longest LED dome at sea, and it towers over a promenade of retail shops and restaurants. There are five pools that range from a waterpark for the kids to a quieter place to relax for adults.



Roger Weitalla worked at the Virnig Manufacturing Minnesota location for 24 years and now serves as plant manager at Pikeville.

SMOOTH OPERATIONS

Virnig Manufacturing's two locations work together

Story by LISA SAVAGE

It's about 1,000 miles from the Virnig Manufacturing facility in Rice, Minnesota, to the company's second location in Pikeville, Tennessee. As teams from both locations work together, though, it's like they're in the same room thanks to state-of-the-art fiber internet technology.

In business in Minnesota since 1989, Virnig Manufacturing produces skid steer attachments for tractors and other heavy machinery. Equipment manufacturing takes place at both locations, and a fiber optic internet network helps keep the process flowing smoothly. "We stream training sessions and meetings, and we're able to essentially be in the same room," says Alyssa Monson, Virnig's company relations manager.

Much of the programming and design is web-based, and both facilities have access to high-speed fiber. In Pikeville, BTC Fiber's network provides the bandwidth necessary to collaborate easily. "We're

able to communicate and share files seamlessly," says Robert Goldade, Virnig's vice president of operations. "We run the two facilities as one. Distance isn't an issue."

Virnig purchased the 62,000-square-foot facility in Pikeville in 2021, investing \$11.6 million to expand operations and help meet growing product demands in the Southeast.

THE EARLY YEARS

Dean and Lois Virnig both grew up in rural Pierz, Minnesota, and knew the importance of reliable repair work for local farms and construction companies. They established the business in 1989 in a garage on their property just outside Pierz and focused on repairs and custom orders.

Word traveled fast in the small town and across central Minnesota. Within five years of opening the doors, Dean and Lois moved from their makeshift shop into a larger building and expanded into manufacturing

skid steer attachments and dump trailers. They subsequently changed their company's name to Virnig Manufacturing Inc.

By the mid-1990s, the company was focusing more on attachments like skid loaders. A high demand for their products, along with limited space, led the Virnigs to build a state-of-the-art facility in 2001, about 30 miles away in Rice, Minnesota. Continued growth led to an additional facility in 2010, and they added another 28,000-square-foot building in 2014 that includes an automated wash bay and powder-coat paint system.

The company added a 24,000-square-foot welding addition and office space for engineering in 2021. Today, Virnig Manufacturing has almost 200 employees. All the growth at the Minnesota location didn't address the transportation issues with one of their main distributors about an hour north of Atlanta, however, Dean says.

In late 2021, the company started



Josh Woitalla, of Virnig Manufacturing, uses a laser cutting machine at the facility in Pikeville.



Jesse Blankenship works in the final assembly and inspection department at Virnig Manufacturing.



Bobby Shepherd attaches side edges to a piece of equipment at Virnig Manufacturing.

looking for a location within two or three hours of Atlanta. The Chattanooga area was considered first, and company officials connected with the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, and Sam Wills, the agency's southeast regional director. "He took us around and showed us some great locations," Dean says. "Then Sam asked us if we'd consider being farther out, in a more rural area, and he told us about Pikeville."

Some of the Virnig family went on a few trips across the Southeast to scout other possible locations. "We saw a lot of nice places, but it just felt right every time we came back to Pikeville," Dean says.

When the Virnig team met with Pikeville city and Bledsoe County officials, they felt welcome. "It felt similar to the area we've always been used to," Dean says.

With the help of city and state officials, Virnig searched for a new facility and ultimately found the Pikeville property that suited the company's needs perfectly. Virnig bought the 62,000-square-foot building in November 2021 and started renovations. In early 2022, production started, and the company hosted an open house last May which was attended by the governor and other state and local officials. "They really made us feel welcome throughout the entire process, and that cemented the decision that we made to locate in Pikeville," Dean says.

THE MANUFACTURING PROCESS

Virnig's facilities in Minnesota and Pikeville encompass all aspects of the manufacturing process, from engineering and cutting raw materials to machining, welding and painting all of its skid steer attachments in-house. The company

is already seeing the savings in transportation costs. Equipment made in Pikeville travels more quickly, and less expensively, to the Georgia distributor and to the East Coast for easier access to shipping along the Eastern Seaboard.

Although the company has grown substantially over the past 30 years, the mission of providing a high-quality, durable product has been — and will continue to be — the same in Pikeville. Plant Manager Roger Woitalla, who worked at the Rice facility for 24 years, leads that effort. He and his family relocated to Pikeville a year ago. "My family loves it here," Roger says.

The expansion in Pikeville will eventually create 74 new jobs in Bledsoe County. About 20 people are currently on the payroll. "We've hired some really good people, and that has allowed us to get everything going and up to speed," Roger says. 📞

8 apps for every pet owner



Story by DREW WOOLLEY

New pets are always popular gifts around the holidays. But the new year is when the responsibility for all that feeding, walking and those never-ending bathroom breaks can really set in. Fortunately, technology is here to help you stay on top of all of your new best friend's needs, from training and wellness to games and socialization. Check out these apps to see how they can make pet care simpler, whether you're a new pet owner or an amateur zookeeper.



Puppr — Every new dog owner could use some help with training. With Puppr, you have access to training videos, over 100 lessons,

live chats with trainers, progress tracking and more. Celebrity dog trainer Sara Carson leads the programs, and your pup will be able to keep up with her “super collies” in no time.



Cat Training Tips — If you're looking to establish ground rules with a new feline friend, the more streamlined Cat Training

Tips app is a good reference for practical tips on common issues like litter box training and scratching.



Pet First Aid — Every pet owner worries about what to do in an emergency situation. The Pet First Aid app from the American Red

Cross has you covered. It offers step-by-step instructions for situations like your pet being attacked by another animal or eating something toxic. You can even learn how to give your pet CPR, check for warning signs and look up the closest veterinary hospital.



11pets — Keeping up with your pet's medical needs on top of your own can be a challenge, which is why it helps to have an app like

11pets to keep everything covered. Store your furry friend's medical history, medication and vet schedules, or track their weight and nutrition to make sure they're on the healthy path.



Cat Fishing 2 — Humans aren't the only ones who enjoy a good mobile game. Cat Fishing 2 from Friskies is designed specifically for

cats, and you can download it to your phone or tablet. Start it up, place your device on the floor and let your cat kill time swiping at colorful fish on the screen.



BarkHappy — If you're looking for dog-friendly people and places in your area, BarkHappy is the app for you. Use the interactive

map to find hotels, restaurants, bars and more where your dog will be welcome. You can also send out the call if your pup goes missing or find nearby dogs with whom to set up a play date.



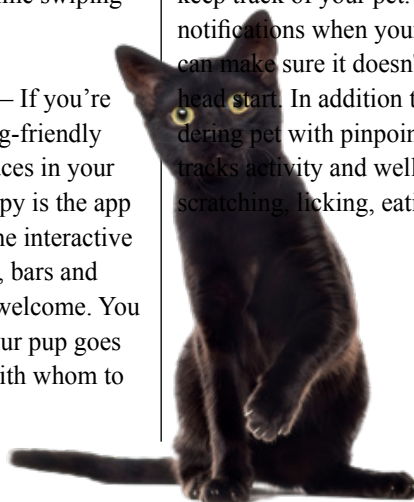
Rover — Rover is the top pet sitting app with over 200,000 caretakers in the U.S. and Canada. Rover's team handles the vetting,

and over 95% of reviewed services on the app have earned a five-star rating. Despite the name, Rover offers services for all kinds of pets, not just dogs. The app is also great for pet lovers looking for new job opportunities.



Whistle — You probably know an adventurous dog who likes to explore every chance it gets. With the

Whistle app and accompanying GPS tracker, it's never been easier to keep track of your pet. The app sends you notifications when your pet gets out so you can make sure it doesn't get too much of a head start. In addition to finding your wandering pet with pinpoint accuracy, the app tracks activity and wellness indicators like scratching, licking, eating and drinking. 🐾



SIT, STAY, BINGE

Your furry friends might fetch the remote for these programs



With more TV shows streaming every day, there is more entertainment than anyone can keep up with. But did you know your pet might enjoy a good binge as much as you?

Programming for pets is on the rise but it's not a new idea. In 2012, the dog food brand Bakers began running a 60-second commercial targeted right at their canine consumers, complete with barking dogs to get their attention and high-pitched sounds human viewers couldn't hear.

If you're worried that your pets might get bored while you're away at work, or you just can't give them your full attention 24/7, consider some of this programming that can help stimulate, relax and even train your pet throughout the day.

DOGTV

When it comes to man's best friend, there's a dedicated streaming service to keep your dog happy and occupied. Available on major streaming devices like Roku, Chromecast and Apple TV, DOGTV offers a variety of programming.

Some programs offer playful sequences to prevent boredom and provide mental stimulation, while others offer calming scenes to keep pooches relaxed. Training programs help dogs get used to common

noises like doorbells and car sounds. There are even a few shows available for their humans.

SQUIRREL!

Think your furry friends might be getting bored while you're away from home? Many cats and dogs respond to videos of birds, squirrels and fish. Cats, in particular, are visual animals, making them more likely to be entertained and mentally enriched by watching the quick movements of prey across a screen.

Because dogs rely more on their sense of smell, breeds with better eyesight are more likely to show interest in the TV. They tend to respond to images of other dogs running or socializing and might try to interact as they would in real life by barking or sniffing. Fortunately, no matter what grabs your pets' attention, there are plenty of videos available on sites like YouTube designed to keep them occupied for hours while you're out.

FOR THE BIRDS

Birds can be extremely smart and emotionally sensitive animals, making it especially challenging to keep them occupied. Many birds have a natural interest in new sounds and colors, making the TV a

good way to keep them engaged throughout the day.

If you're trying to expand your feathered friend's vocabulary, some programming might even help to train them while you're out. Repetition is key for helping any bird pick up a new word or phrase, and there are numerous videos available that will repeat common phrases for hours on end. Hit play and run, keeping your bird mentally engaged while you're away.

FUN AND GAMES

If your cat likes to curl up next to you during a gaming session, consider adding "Stray" to your list. When BlueTwelve Studio released its cat-themed adventure game last year, it was an instant hit with cat owners. But it turns out the game was just as interesting to their feline friends.

Videos and photos of players' cats being entranced by the digital kitty on screen became so popular that PlayStation even put out the call for submissions for a charity event with the hashtag #StrayReactions. The best ones went into a digital photo book presented to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals along with a \$25,000 donation. That's a win for everyone. 🐾

A BIG BOOST

Grants help BTC Fiber achieve 100% fiber network sooner

Story by LISA SAVAGE

It costs an average of \$40,000 per mile to build a fiber optic network in rural areas, says Charlie Boring, CEO at BTC Fiber. It's an expensive venture, and BTC Fiber has relied on grants and loans to move toward a 100% fiber network.

Now, with the recent announcement that BTC has received more than \$22 million in grant funding, the cooperative can reach that goal sooner than expected. These funds will allow BTC Fiber to make its network available to every member in the cooperative's service territory and expand into surrounding counties within two years. "Our team here at BTC Fiber has worked hard and put in a lot of time and effort on the grant applications," Boring says. "A fiber optic network is a very expensive venture, and we are thrilled to have received these grants that will help us meet our goals of providing a 100% fiber optic network to our customers sooner rather than later."

The grants provide funding for fiber expansion in Sequatchie, Bledsoe, Van Buren and Rhea counties and southern Cumberland County. Each of these county governments also committed to providing funds they received from the American Rescue Plan, the COVID-19 relief legislation aimed at increasing broadband infrastructure and addressing other needs resulting from the pandemic. The funds from the counties amount to about \$1.3 million with a BTC Fiber match of almost \$8.3 million, for about \$31.6 million with the grant money included.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Construction crews work on fiber installation for a BTC Fiber project.

Steve Grant, a fiber technician, is part of the installation team.

Spools of fiber are stationed at a local church yard for easy access while BTC Fiber crews work to extend the fiber network.



In September, Gov. Bill Lee and the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development announced \$447 million in grants for the expansion of fiber internet across the state, including the \$22 million for BTC. The broadband infrastructure grants will provide high-speed internet access to more than 150,000 unserved homes and businesses in 58 counties across Tennessee.

BTC Fiber's network expansion started in the late 2000s. A subdivision at Long Branch Lakes in Bledsoe County became the first all-fiber development in the area. "It typically costs more to run fiber in rural areas," says Matt Boynton, engineering manager at BTC Fiber. "If you hit rock, and we have plenty of rocky areas, it can



Photos by Mark Gilliland

be an additional \$10 or more per foot. It's a very expensive venture, but by using as many grants as we can, we can do it as economically as possible."

The cooperative has come a long way since those first fiber lines. Now, BTC offers internet-only plans, and there's not as much emphasis on landline telephones. "Fiber optics are vital in continuing to meet the needs of our members, and it's our goal to reach every member and provide this valuable utility as quickly and economically as possible," Boring says. "Fiber optic networks are as important nowadays as the telephone service was when our cooperative was first established." ☎

MEET YOUR BTC FIBER EMPLOYEES

Customer Support Specialists

- Michael Stults, Outside Plant Manager
- Brian Bridges, Outside Plant Supervisor

What's the name of your department?

BTC Fiber Customer Support Specialists, which is part of the outside plant team.

What is the primary function of your department?

Our primary function is keeping our customers' service working properly and assisting in any issues they may be having. We strive for efficiency and satisfaction. Our goal is to provide the best support possible and to make sure that our customers receive great service in a timely manner. The customers' satisfaction is very important to us.

What role does your department play in the overall operations at BTC Fiber?

The Customer Support Specialists answer calls from customers via the repair department line. Specialists troubleshoot with customers to try to find the problem and see if there's a quick solution without having to send a repair team.

The repair department is a very fast-paced environment, and the specialists multitask, working with the customers as well as assisting the installation repair technicians with anything they need while they're working out in the field.

If a problem requires that the repair team go to a customer's home or business, the specialists create a trouble ticket and dispatch the technician. Specialists also handle the scheduling for new installations and upgrades and, along with other things, assist customers with speed tests, network name and password changes.

What information about your department would be helpful for members to know?

We do not monitor your service, so, if you are experiencing any trouble with your service, please do not hesitate to call 423-447-6815 and speak to one of our Customer Support Specialists. We also have a second shift that can troubleshoot over the phone Sunday through Thursday from 2-10 p.m.

Visit the BTC Fiber website, bledsoe.net, to find a troubleshooting Q&A for many common issues that may be helpful in getting you back up and running.

What is something unique that the general public might not know?

Most of the time, we are able to clear the trouble over the phone by troubleshooting with the customer. If we are unable to clear it from the office, we will send a technician out to your service address to repair the issue. Most of our repair tickets clear the same day. ☎



Barbara Davis



Kristie White



John Davis



Crystal Smith



Kathy Little



Lindy Walker



Megan Morris



Bailey Longson

Customer Support Specialists

- Barbara Davis — 6 years, Customer Support Coordinator. Barbara recently became BTC Fiber's Executive Assistant and Administrative Manager.
- Kristie White — 2 years, Customer Support Supervisor
- Kathy Little — 25 years, Customer Support Specialist, retiring in early 2023
- Megan Morris — 7 years, Customer Support Specialist
- John Davis — 7 years, Customer Support Specialist
- Crystal Smith — 2 years, Customer Support Specialist
- Lindy Walker — 4 years, Customer Support Specialist
- Bailey Longson — 6 months, Customer Support Specialist



AIR FRYERS

can solve dinnertime dilemmas

The savior of simple dishes and leftover pizza

Air fryers have crisped their way into America's heart. Ranging from models with one knob and a basket to others with lots of bells and whistles, they've become as common in the American kitchen as toasters and coffeepots.

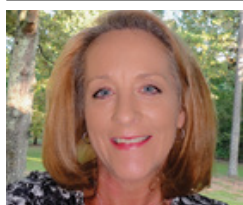
So how do you know which air fryer is the best fit for you?

You'll become a champion of the air fryer with the Ninja. Priced around \$150, it has a large basket and multiple settings that allow for dehydrating, reheating, baking and, oh yes, air frying. If you plan to do a good bit of cooking in your air fryer, this may be the model for you.

But if you're cooking for one, or just want to see if an air fryer is right for you, then a less-expensive option like Dash's air fryer — \$49.95 at online retailers — might be better. With just one setting and a compact size, it's perfect for one baked potato, a handful of French fries or a chicken thigh or two. It comes in multiple colors to add a little pizzazz to your kitchen counter.

It goes without saying that air frying is a healthier alternative to deep frying. Think of an air fryer as multiple appliances in one. It cooks quickly like a microwave, toasts like a toaster oven and fries like a deep fryer.

These kitchen wonders work magic on vegetables, proteins and baked goods because they're basically small convection ovens. They have a fan-and-exhaust system that blows hot air across your food for even cooking and browning. It works just as well whether you're making breaded onion rings from the freezer, roasting fresh broccoli or frying up some wings. Baking powder in the rub helps make air fryer wings crispy.



FOOD EDITOR
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Photography by MARK GILLILAND | Food Styling by RHONDA GILLILAND



AIR FRYER CHICKEN WINGS

- 12 chicken wings, whole
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional)
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 cup Buffalo hot sauce

Cut the wings into pieces so you have 24 wings. Preheat the air fryer to 380 F. Spray the fryer basket after preheating. Place the wings in a large bowl and add olive oil, garlic powder, baking powder, salt, cayenne pepper and

black pepper. Toss wings until fully covered. Place the wings in a single layer — as many as will fit without overlapping — on the air fryer basket.

Air fry the wings at 380 F for 20 minutes, flipping them every 5 minutes. Increase the temperature to 400 F and cook an additional 2 minutes for extra crispy skin. Use a digital meat thermometer to ensure the internal temperature is 165 F.

Carefully remove the wings from the air fryer, cover with Buffalo sauce and serve with your favorite sides.



CRISPY AIR FRYER POTATOES

- 1 pound small Yukon Gold potatoes, halved
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 1 teaspoon Cajun seasoning (optional)
- Kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Lemon wedge, for serving
- Freshly chopped parsley, for garnish

In a large bowl, toss potatoes with oil, garlic powder, Italian seasoning and Cajun seasoning, if using. Season with salt and pepper.

Place potatoes in basket of air fryer and cook at 400 F for 10 minutes. Shake basket and stir potatoes, and then cook until potatoes are golden and tender, 8 to 10 minutes more. Squeeze lemon juice over cooked potatoes and garnish with parsley before serving.

AIR FRYER EGG ROLLS

- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 1/2 pound ground pork or ground chicken
- 4 cups coleslaw mix
- 1/2 cup matchstick-cut carrots
- 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 green onions, sliced
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons rice or white vinegar
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/8 teaspoon Chinese 5-spice seasoning
- 12 egg roll wrappers
- Nonstick cooking spray
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Sweet chili sauce, duck sauce or hot mustard sauce, for dipping

Heat sesame oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the pork and cook until crumbled and cooked through, about 4 minutes. Add the coleslaw mix, carrots, ginger and garlic. Cook 2-3 minutes or until the cabbage has wilted.

Remove from the heat; stir in the green onions, soy sauce, vinegar, pepper, salt and 5-spice seasoning. Transfer to a plate and let cool slightly.

Place 1 egg roll wrapper flat on a work surface with the points of the wrapper facing up and down (like a diamond). Place about 1/3 cup of the pork/chicken mixture in the middle of the wrapper. Dip your fingers in water and dampen the edges of the wrapper. Fold the left and then right points of the wrapper in toward the center. Fold the bottom point over the center just like you would a burrito, rolling the wrapper toward the remaining point to form a tight cylinder. Press edges to seal. Place on a plate and cover with a dry towel. Repeat the process with remaining wrappers and pork/chicken mixture.

Preheat the air fryer to 375 F and spray the air fryer basket with cooking spray. Brush the tops of the egg rolls with olive oil. Working in batches, place the egg rolls in the basket and cook 7 minutes. Flip the egg rolls over and brush with more oil. Cook for an additional 2 minutes. Serve with your favorite dipping sauce. 🍴





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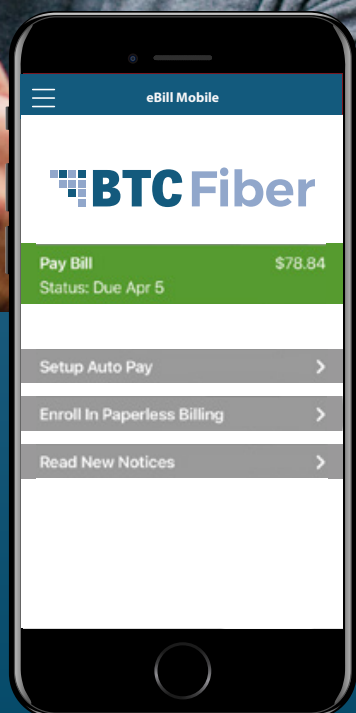
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