

CONNECTED

Career makeover

Diagnosis changes path of
chef's life



SUPPORTING
STUDENTS

EXPLORING
CAVES



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association

Supporting the Universal Service Fund

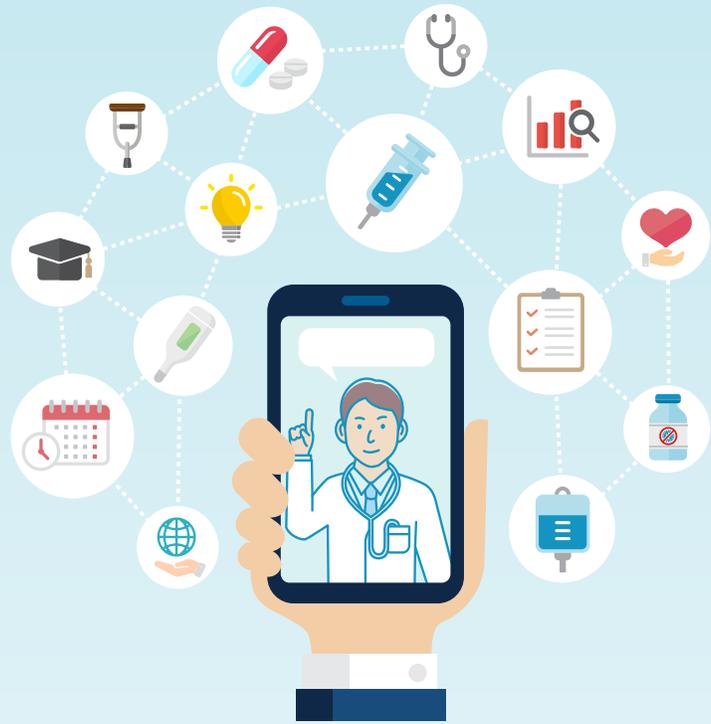
For more than 100 years, America has embraced the belief that everyone should have reliable access to reasonably priced communications services. Today, the federal Universal Service Fund, known as the USF, continues its vital role in this mission. The fund helps rural consumers access services comparable in price and quality to those in urban areas, making services more affordable for low-income families. It also supports critical connections important to schools, libraries, health care and businesses.

As we work with NTCA members daily, we see the good the USF does for rural America. We proudly support the continuation of the USF even as new broadband programs expand access to unserved areas. Simply, it makes a practical difference.

Consider, for example, the economic value of broadband, which exceeds \$1.5 trillion annually. It sustains hundreds of thousands of jobs and adds billions of dollars to local economies. With the growing demand for broadband, the USF supports the advanced, sustainable services rural businesses need to compete globally.

Similarly, fast and reliable broadband access helps narrow health care disparities between rural and metropolitan communities. The USF expands the reach of medical services through telehealth and fosters improved patient communication as well as the adoption of electronic health records.

Join us in support of the USF and its essential mission to provide broadband access to all rural residents. I encourage you to learn more about the critical role of the USF by visiting ntca.org/universalservice. 📄



Help may be a click away

Thanks to telehealth services, a trip to a physician’s office isn’t always necessary, and when you’re fighting a winter bug, that convenience counts. Here are a few tips to make your telehealth visit as productive and easy as possible:

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPOT: Find a quiet, well-lit space for your telehealth session. It’s not a Broadway audition, but good lighting helps your doctor see you better. Eliminate background noise as much as possible — you don’t want the family pet stealing the spotlight during your appointment!

HAVE YOUR INFO READY: Make a mini cheat sheet with your symptoms, questions and any medications you take. It’s easy to forget things during a virtual visit. Plus, it makes you look like a pro patient!

DRESS APPROPRIATELY: Pajamas might be comfy, but consider saving them for bedtime. Dressing appropriately can not only help your doctor assess your physical condition but also put you in the right mindset for a serious health chat.

BE HONEST AND OPEN: Telehealth works best when you’re open about your symptoms and concerns. Don’t be shy. Doctors can only help if they know the whole story. 📄

Illustration by A.barks/Adobe Stock



Tugging at your purse strings

Online romance scams can break more than just your heart

Falling in love can make anyone vulnerable. Shady cybercriminals know this and are all too eager to steal hearts and much more.

According to the FBI, a romance scam occurs when someone creates a fake online profile and fakes romantic interest to gain trust to steal the victim's money or personal information. Also known as "catfishing," romance scams can be devastating, both financially and emotionally.

Nearly 70,000 people reported being the victim of catfishing in 2022, and losses hit a staggering \$1.3 billion, according to Federal Trade Commission statistics. But actual losses are likely much higher — romance fraud is grossly underreported due to its sensitive nature.

Romance scammers often prey on older people, who may be divorced or widowed. Online dating apps are just one place they lurk. They also reach out through popular social media sites like Facebook and Instagram. They target victims' insecurities and work to develop intimacy as quickly as possible — a practice known as "love bombing." Scammers attempt to make the victim feel special or like they're the "only one who gets" the culprit.

Sometimes a scammer will ask for a short-term loan to get out of a bad situation and start a new life with the victim. Or, they'll say access to a credit card would smooth the way to a relationship. Other gifts include asking for money to cover the customs charges for an expensive gift, or a crypto investor who wants to help the victim cash in on the trend.

Despite the warning signs, victims are often too lovestruck to realize it's a swindle.

Romance scam victims can be male or female, young or old. Their only common denominator is that they believe in true love, and they feel they have found it. 📧

Follow your head, not your heart

- Allow relationships to develop slowly and naturally.
- Set up a video chat to verify the identity of the person you are messaging.
- Research the person you are messaging.
- Conduct a reverse image search to make sure the person you are talking to is really the person in the photo.

If you've been scammed

Falling victim to a scammer can happen to anyone. Talking about your experience can lessen feelings of shame and help protect others from being victimized.

- Immediately contact your bank or financial institution.
- Report it as soon as possible to the FTC at reportfraud.ftc.gov.
- Alert the FBI's fraud division — the Internet Crime Complaint Center — at ic3.gov/. Be prepared to share any records of your communication with the scammer.
- Contact the platform where the scammer first contacted you, so it can prevent others from being victimized.

How do we make 2024 a good year?

It starts with us

“And now we welcome a new year. Full of things that have never been.”



JEFF WILSON
Chief Executive Officer

This quote, by poet Rainer Maria Rilke, speaks the truth so clearly.

The closing of one year is always an astounding memory jog. So many things happen in 365 days. What will the new year hold? My hope is that 2024 brings this world more good than bad, healing, recovery and hope.

How does one heal a broken world? Help a neighbor. Pick up that discarded wrapper that you see on the sidewalk. Pay it forward.

In essence, it starts with us. Little acts lead to big changes.

There is no better testament to this than our recent Give Big, Get Gig promotion where our customers and employees collectively donated nearly four tons of food to area food pantries, almost doubling last year's donations! The stories shared by customers who donated were touching and a testament to our generous community.

As inflation rates spike, we're seeing it in our own backyard. The rates we charge for television programming are driven by the costs we pay programmers. Our programmers notified us that per-customer programming rates are drastically increasing in 2024.

We understand this is a significant increase, and we, too, are dismayed by the exorbitant costs being passed on to our customers. To be clear, WCTEL does not profit off of your television service.

We understand that this increase may be too significant for you to continue receiving television service from WCTEL. We want to help you find ways to lower your bills.

To that end, should you wish to discontinue television service and try streaming using WCTEL's internet service, we are running a promotion where you may choose between receiving a free streaming device or a complimentary speed boost to our premium 1-Gig service for the months of January, February and March.

To take advantage of this promotion, please call our office at 864-446-2111 and mention "cut the cable." Go to wctel.com/cutthecable to learn more.

Many people are leery of streaming. I understand, it is a shift from traditional television. The good news, though, is that there are many streaming services that offer a similar experience — and channel lineup — to the TV experience you are accustomed to. To learn more, visit wctel.com/streaming101. While we are not affiliated with a streaming service, nor do we promote one platform over another, we are committed to helping you understand that you do have options.

Together, we're going to make positive changes in 2024. 📺



CONNECTED

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is a member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people of Abbeville, Anderson and McCormick counties.

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On the Cover:



After a tough diagnosis, Erica McCier decided to pursue her love of cooking and launch her own business. See story Page 12.

Spreading love and WiFi signals



WCTEL cares about our community and connecting you with loved ones.

Our team enjoys creating fun behind-the-scenes segments and important announcements for our social media channels. Sharing digital technology tips and cybersecurity suggestions is our way of making sure we maintain a strong connection.

Find us on social media and be sure our "fam" is part of your "'gram!" #LoveInEveryGigabit



WCTEL Marketing Communications Specialist Hannah Stephenson, right, interviews Marketing Assistant Jess Bowie for an Instagram Reel.

Customers make a difference

WCTEL employees continued their tradition of gratitude with the Give Big, Get Gig holiday food drive in November. Customers who donated three or more food items received a bump in speed to 1 Gig for the whole month of December.

WCTEL distributed carloads of canned food and nonperishable items to charities in our communities of Abbeville, McCormick, Iva, Greenwood and Newberry. We're thankful for the outpouring of community kindness and support, ensuring that everyone had food for the holidays.



WCTEL Customer Service Representative Preston Evans accepts a food drive donation from customer Louise Shirley.



Community members donated hundreds of items during WCTEL's Give Big, Get Gig food drive.

Need help paying for internet?

The Affordable Connectivity Program is a Federal Communications Commission initiative that helps families and households struggling to afford internet service.

The ACP initiative provides a discount of up to \$30 a month. Call 877-384-2575 or visit getinternet.gov today to see if you qualify and to apply!



Cumberland Caverns
near McMinnville,
Tennessee

BEAUTY LIES BELOW

Area caverns contain
links to the past

Story by KATHY DENES

Bones and footprints of prehistoric jaguars and their prey are preserved within many caves across the Southeast, but that's just the beginning. There are also works of art, as well as artifacts and writings of indigenous peoples — from the ancients to those who would face a Trail of Tears. There are even tools left behind by those who mined saltpeter used in multiple wars.

There are colonies of bats, ever-growing stalactites and stalagmites, as well as flowing underground waters. Some caves are easily found, offering entry through a vast visible gash in a mountainside. Others remain hidden until their accidental discovery, perhaps by a passerby on a hot day who notices cool air seeping out through a wall of rock. They range in size from shallow squeezes to soaring cathedrals, and their passages can stretch for hundreds of miles.

KENTUCKY



Kentucky's Mammoth Cave is the world's longest known cave system, with over 400 miles of its corridors mapped and surveyed. Within a short drive of Mammoth are numerous other caves with their own claims to fame, making the Park City area one of the most popular cave tour destinations in the country. Popular neighboring attractions include Diamond Caverns, a World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve that has offered public tours for more than 160 years. A good resource for learning more about these and other notable caves across the state is worldofcaves.com/the-best-list-of-caves-in-kentucky.

Photo courtesy of Cumberland Caverns



Photo by Wangkun Jia / Adobe Stock



Photo by K.A. / Adobe Stock

In Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, stalactites create a memorable natural spectacle.

The National Park Service manages Mammoth Cave.

TENNESSEE



Tennessee's caverns are spread far and wide. Near McMinnville are Cumberland Caverns, open daily year-round, and Big Bone Cave, named for the giant sloth bones found near where Civil War-era saltpeter vats remain. In the Chattanooga area, visitors can descend by elevator deep into Lookout Mountain to witness the beauty of Ruby Falls or can cross the interstate to visit Raccoon Mountain Caverns. A drive up I-75 brings visitors to Sweetwater, where boats glide across The Lost Sea in artifact-rich Craighead Caverns, open every day except Thanksgiving and Christmas. Continue toward the Great Smoky Mountains to find the Forbidden Caverns of Sevierville and impressive Tuckaleechee Caverns in Townsend. Read about some of these and more at explorationjunkie.com/caves-in-tennessee.

ALABAMA



Alabama is home to hundreds of caves stretching along the Appalachian foothills. Of those, six are touted by onlyinyourstate.com as among the very best and included in its Alabama Cave Trail. These renowned subterranean destinations include Russell Cave, Neversink Pit, Sauta Cave, Cathedral Caverns, Rickwood Caverns and Majestic Cave, formerly called DeSoto Caverns. Find information about these and other popular Alabama caves at enterthecaves.com/best-caves-in-alabama. 🗨️

DIG DEEPER

- » cavern.com/directory
- » worldofcaves.com/the-ultimate-list-of-caves-in-america
- » abackpackerstale.com/best-caves-in-the-united-states
- » Also, visit tripadvisor.com and search for "caves" to find options in your area and beyond.



TO SAVE A CAVE

Protecting the fragile ecosystems and histories of caves large and small is the mission of Southeastern Cave Conservancy Inc. The nonprofit has worked since 1991 to acquire and sustainably manage endangered caves. Through cave purchases and its EduBat and Project Underground programs, among others, SCCi has preserved historic Cherokee syllabary, written characters serving as an alphabet, found on cavern walls and created compelling curriculum and educator workshops. Check out the group's ongoing projects at saveyourcaves.org.



Photo courtesy of Cumberland Caverns

Cumberland Caverns near McMinnville, Tennessee, offers unique adventures, including a lantern tour.



CONNECT AND SAVE

ACP discounts internet services for students and families

Story by JOHN CLAYTON

Photos by Matt Ledger



Anderson School District 3 Superintendent Kathy Hipp reviews an online lesson with AJ McCullough.

Improved public education depends on faster, more affordable internet service across the region, says John Campbell, McCormick County Schools' Teacher of the Year.

"The very first word that pops into my mind is opportunity," he says. "Allowing students to have the wealth of information that is the internet gives them that opportunity to be more curious. It gives them a chance to really take hold of their own education, be able to learn what they want, how they want and when they want."

Those opportunities do not always come easily — or cheaply. The federal government is working with internet service providers, such as WCTEL, to make service more affordable and accessible to everyone. The Affordable Connectivity Program, or ACP, is a need-based initiative that provides discounts on high-speed internet service to qualifying households.

"Practically every kid in these rural communities in Anderson District 3, McCormick and Abbeville counties are all qualified," says Stephen Taylor, WCTEL's community affairs and economic development director. "As a cooperative, WCTEL certainly advocates for the ACP because it's a program we would like to see our customers participate in to reduce their internet bills."

Under ACP guidelines, the families of students who qualify for free lunch programs in their local school district automatically qualify for ACP discounts through internet providers like WCTEL. Eligible households can receive a monthly discount on their internet bill of up to \$30.

Note: federal funding for ACP is anticipated to run out in April 2024. It is unknown whether funding will be reinstated.



FIND OUT MORE

Most, if not all, public school students and their families in WCTEL's coverage area are eligible for savings through the ACP, but others may also be eligible.

To learn more about the Affordable Connectivity Program, including if your household qualifies, visit wctel.com/acp.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Westwood Elementary students Camauriah Belton and Zarion Enwright work through math problems. Westwood Elementary student Amelia Hersherberger navigates an online lesson while in Stephanie Stanley's fifth-grade classroom. Elizabeth White's students log in to their devices as they prepare for the Measures of Achievement Progress testing.

Also, in districts with an average income level below a certain threshold, all students, regardless of their individual family incomes, are eligible to receive free breakfasts and lunches. Households in these school districts qualify for the ACP through the federal Community Eligibility Provision. In Abbeville, McCormick and Anderson District 3 schools, about 6,200 students and their families are eligible.

NEW APPROACHES TO SCHOOL

The students that media specialist Beth Ellen White sees at Westwood Elementary School in her native Abbeville County have never known a world without cellphones, Chromebooks or internet access. "I've seen how technology use has increased," she says, noting students sometimes even advise her on the latest tech tips, tricks and happenings.

"Our teachers, including myself, are using technology for assessments as well as practice work and instruction," White says. "Getting in contact with students through email, it was easier to get them to respond. So, after COVID, we're using the technology a lot more."

A new way of teaching also means a new way of learning. "We don't teach raw facts like we used to," Campbell says. "We're trying to teach the ability to navigate through technology, navigate through the internet, when we're trying to instill inquiry and problem-solving-based skills. It's hard to have that curiosity and to

have that inquiry if students aren't able to look things up at school or at home. So, that stifles a lot of conversation, a lot of discussion and a lot of learning if they're unable to answer those questions right when they have them."

ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

Kathy Hipp, superintendent for Anderson School District 3, knows the challenges residents of her district face when it comes to internet access. She only recently got high-speed internet at her own home.

Hipp estimates 35%-40% of students in the Anderson 3 do not have internet access, and price isn't the only barrier. While access has improved, many families still have few options. "Some cannot afford it without the ACP, but even if they could afford it, the fiber doesn't run to their houses," she says.

A partnership between WCTEL and Upcountry Fiber, which is based in Oconee County and serves parts of Anderson County, is part of the solution. They are working to provide high-speed internet access to underserved areas across the region while helping to make it more affordable through the ACP.

Hipp says all of it has made a difference. "WCTEL has been a tremendous partner as they try to reach our underserved areas," she says. "Nobody can reach them fast enough, but it's not from a lack of effort. As a school district, we appreciate that. It's a tremendous step." 

IN THE GAME

Esports growth offers students community and opportunity

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

The Texas Wesleyan esports program started with a 2017 conversation that wasn't about video games at all. Eugene Friar, who was then working in student affairs and is now director of esports and gaming, approached the vice president of his division to talk about what the university could do to be a fun and exciting option for prospective students.

"I was hoping he'd give me some answers, but he flipped it on me and was like, 'Bring me some ideas, and we'll discuss it,'" Eugene says. "I wasn't thinking esports at all, even though I've been a gamer since the Commodore 64 days."

While brainstorming, Eugene came across fledgling esports programs at places like the University of California, Irvine, Missouri's Maryville University and Robert Morris University in Pennsylvania. Groups of students were coming together to compete in multiplayer games like Overwatch, Super Smash Bros. and League of Legends.

Today, the National Association of Collegiate Esports, or NACE, recognizes more than 240 schools with competitive esports teams. The experience not only opens doors in the gaming industry but can also help students develop skills for a variety of careers.

Texas Wesleyan's esports team evolved from a group focused primarily on competition to one that welcomes anyone from casual hobbyists to hardcore gamers. For Eugene, it's an important community that supports students who might not share other interests on campus. But it's also a

Trojan horse for helping them find their path through school and beyond.

"We tell our recruits early in the process my job is to trick you into learning," Eugene says. "If you want to try out for one of our teams, hopefully we'll go to the stadium and play. But what's your major? What are you going to do after you graduate? How is this going to help you get there?"

LEVELING UP

As access to high-speed internet expands from urban centers to rural areas, competitive gaming's popularity has soared. A study by Pew Research Center found that about 70% of college students say they play video games at least once in a while.

While the Texas Wesleyan Rams have teams for the squad-based shooter game Overwatch 2 and the fighting game Super Smash Bros., it's also important for Eugene to appeal to that larger audience. When the program was more focused on competitive gaming, he found that some students with a casual interest in gaming felt like they didn't belong. That's why the



The Texas Wesleyan University Overwatch team reviews video for a match.

Photo courtesy of Eugene Friar



ABOVE: University of Kentucky students enjoy competing in the school's new esports lounge.

RIGHT: Students try out the gaming lounge at the University of Kentucky's Latinx Open House.

club includes a team that creates, edits and streams content for platforms like Twitch and YouTube, as well as groups for fans of anime, Dungeons & Dragons and more casual gaming.

Eugene says overall participation increased by slightly deemphasizing competition and offering more ways to participate with casual gaming clubs, a social media team and an event team. "We went from having seven competitive teams to two, and the number of students in our program has actually gone up a little bit because there's more ways for people to get involved," he says.



Bryce Edwards, a junior, received a scholarship to help run the esports program and became captain of the school's Smash Bros. team. He says the social and leadership skills he learned in that role will be invaluable as he pursues a career in marketing.

For Kelvin Coker, a senior criminal justice major and wrestler, it's been a new way to connect with people. "People need a place that allows them to be themselves and interact with people of different backgrounds so that they can develop the skills necessary to go through life," Kelvin says. "It was a different vibe than wrestling, which was extremely refreshing. It felt good to be among people who shared interests in things outside of sports."

Heath Price, associate vice president of partnerships at the University of Kentucky, found the same enthusiasm when he first met with an informal esports club on his campus in 2018. With school resources behind it, the UK Esports Club has grown to include hundreds of members who enjoy the university's recently completed gaming lounge, along with approximately 70 students who play competitively.

"What we've seen is that the idea of a gamer just being someone who might be interested in building games is kind of a misnomer," Heath says. "A lot of these

young people have varying interests. I think as much of a career builder as anything is giving people some of those opportunities for exposure and to do things in the community."

TAILOR MADE

Eugene takes a similar approach at

Texas Wesleyan. Whether it's a student who wants to start a clothing line designing the school's esports jersey or a mass communications major building the team's content roadmap for the year, he always looks for ways the program can help students pursue their larger goals.

"The content team isn't about making funny content.

It's about project management," he says. "The student organizations aren't just about talking about the things you love. They're leading a meeting and organizing people."

With the gaming landscape constantly changing, that may even mean meeting students somewhere other than esports. Texas Wesleyan's teams currently compete in the second division of the NACE Starleague, the biggest collegiate esports league in North America.

The Rams had a national championship-winning team for the FIFA soccer game series. Today, that team doesn't exist because the game no longer exists. Earlier this year, Electronic Arts, publisher of the FIFA series of games, ended its branding partnership with global soccer organization FIFA. That left some competitive players out in the cold and highlights a unique challenge for esports.

"You don't win a national championship in football and a few years later it's like, 'Remember when we used to have a football team?' So when the publishers get involved it's tricky," Eugene says. "It wouldn't surprise me if the esports part of what we do goes away in time and you see the more content creation and pop culture things last. It's about meeting the students' needs and matching their interests in a really positive way." 🗨️



The Texas Wesleyan University Super Smash Bros. team prepares for a competition.

Recipe for success

Crafting a culinary career from adversity

Story by ANNE BRALY

Erica McCier's culinary journey began with the Food Network. Her favorite show, "Good Eats" hosted by Alton Brown, provided her with solace during a challenging time. "I fell in love with cooking watching that show," Erica says.

In 2008, Erica learned her kidneys were failing. Three days a week, she watched foodie shows while receiving dialysis treatments. Her health challenges forced her to leave her career as a visual art teacher at J.S. Wright Middle School.

While continuing dialysis and waiting for a transplant, Erica began culinary school, attending class at Virginia College in Greenville twice a week. She received a transplant in 2013, while still in school. After graduating, she worked as a prep cook, line cook and server at The Village Grill in Abbeville. She was also a personal chef. "My goal was to learn every job I could," she says.

The drive home from The Village Grill took Erica past an old brick building that she knew was the right place to open her own restaurant. Now, 10 years after her kidney transplant, she is the chef and owner of Indigenous Underground in Abbeville.

INSPIRED MENU

The restaurant features the indigenous foods of Erica's African and Native American roots. She describes her menu as Afro-Indigenous, with house favorites such as black-eyed pea gumbo, gator and grits and her popular Soul Rolls — seasoned collards and black-eyed peas wrapped in a spring roll and deep fried.



Photos by Matt Ledger

ABOVE: Corn, peppers and onions combine to create a Cajun maque choux.

LEFT: Erica McCier preps vegetables for a side dish.



WCTEL. "They are my go-to company and have my best interests at heart, making sure everything is in order for my business," she says. "I have a lot of trust in them for my security, telephone and internet. We're like family."

In 2023, Erica was selected as one of three South Carolina chef ambassadors representing the South Carolina Department of Agriculture. This past May, she also resumed dialysis treatments after the transplanted kidney began weakening. Erica is on the transplant list again and is eager to get the surgery behind her and return to her kitchen quickly. 📞

Indigenous Underground is a Fresh on the Menu establishment, a designation signifying that at least 25% of its inventory is Certified-South Carolina grown. Erica's restaurant well exceeds that mark, with more than 70% of its ingredients coming from South Carolina farms, including five in Abbeville County.

Erica shares menu updates on social media with the help of broadband from

If you go

Indigenous Underground

117 Trinity St., Abbeville
864-366-9054

indigenousunderground.com

APP-SOLUTE CONTROL

Meet WiFi X



WiFi X

In 2023, WCTEL Network Operations Manager Troy Mack led a team in customizing an app customers can use to optimize and safeguard their broadband networks — WiFi X.

It's a tool that allows you to easily manage your home network right from your smartphone.

Why WiFi X? It's not enough to set up your internet and call it done. You may want to know who is using your network, what they're doing and which devices are consuming bandwidth. Kids, we're looking at you.

Fortunately, WiFi X blocks web threats, viruses and other intrusions that can penetrate an unsecured network, potentially slowing your speeds and compromising the security of your valuable information.

"WiFi X is another tool we have to better serve our customer base," Troy says. "Think of it as a pane of glass for a customer to view their own network."

More than one-third of customers have downloaded the app since the updated version was released in May, and it's included with the WiFi X service for \$7.95 a month. Across the entire system in that time, WiFi X has blocked more than 250,000 web threats, nearly 4,600 viruses and almost 80,000 intrusions.

TOP FEATURES

Network security is the primary reason so many have downloaded the WiFi X app. It also gives you control over who uses your internet, when they use it and where they're allowed to navigate.



WCTEL Network Operations Manager Troy Mack uses the WiFi X app to manage his broadband networks at work and at home.

Parental controls — a must with anyone under 18 on your network — allow you to set time limits, pause their device's internet access and control which sites they can visit.

You can also have up to four networks. Creating a separate guest network allows you to conveniently turn guest access on only during set hours. There's no more worrying about that dinner guest who just needed WiFi access during your two-hour barbecue.

HOW TO USE

Troy's favorite ways to use WiFi X are:

- Leveraging network security to send SMS notifications to his phone in case of an attack.
- Prioritizing internet bandwidth to designated devices or areas of his home.
- He says that feature is especially helpful on work-from-home days.

"I prioritize my office," Troy says. "If I'm working from home, I don't want anybody else intruding." 📞

For more information, visit wctel.com/wifix.

When one pot hits the spot

Simple, delicious and easy

Meals you can make in one pot are ideal for today's busy cooks for two reasons. For starters, little time is wasted going from one pot to another, making sure everything is cooking together nicely. Secondly, you're cooking in one pot, so there's minimal cleanup.

As the name implies, one-pot meals are just that. They are the secret to getting dinner on the table in a jiffy. Generally, the vegetables and protein are cooked together in the same pot. If any other side dishes are needed, it's usually nothing more than a green salad with buttery croutons or a nice piece of crusty bread.

One-pot meals are filled with comfort, something we all yearn for like a big, cozy blanket on a chilly winter's night.



**Food Editor
Anne P. Braly
is a native of
Chattanooga,
Tennessee.**

Photography by **Mark Gilliland**
Food Styling by **Rhonda Gilliland**

CHEESEBURGER PASTA

This is the perfect easy wintertime one-pot meal. It's like having a cheeseburger and spaghetti at the same time, and the kids will love it!

- 1 yellow onion
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1/2 pound ground beef
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 (8-ounce) can tomato sauce
- 2 cups beef broth
- 8 ounces pasta shells, uncooked
- 4 ounces cheddar cheese, shredded
- 2 tablespoons pickle relish
- 2 green onions, sliced

Finely dice the onion. Add the onion, olive oil and ground beef to a large deep skillet, and saute over medium heat until the beef is fully browned and the onion is soft and translucent. Drain off any excess fat, if needed.

Add the flour to the skillet and continue

to stir and cook for 1 minute more. The flour will begin to coat the bottom of the skillet. Be careful not to let the flour burn.

Add the tomato sauce and beef broth to the skillet and stir to dissolve the flour off the bottom of the skillet.

Add the uncooked pasta to the skillet and stir to combine. The liquid in the skillet may not fully cover the pasta, but that is OK.

Place a lid on the skillet, turn the heat up to medium-high, and let the liquid come up to a boil. Once it reaches a boil, give it a quick stir to loosen any pasta from the bottom of the skillet. Replace the lid, and turn the heat down to low. Let the pasta simmer, stirring occasionally (always replacing the lid), for about 10 minutes, or until the pasta is tender and the sauce has thickened. Turn off the heat.

Add the shredded cheddar to the skillet and stir until it has melted into the sauce. Stir the relish into the sauce, then top with sliced green onions. Serve warm.



FIVE-HOUR BEEF STEW

Delicious smells will fill your home as this stew cooks slowly in the oven.

- 1 1/2 pounds chuck roast, cut into bite-size pieces
- 1 cup celery, chunked
- 4 carrots, chunked
- 2-3 medium potatoes, chunked
- 1 onion, sliced or large dice
- 1/2 cup fresh bread crumbs
- 1 large can tomatoes
- 1 cup red wine, optional
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 4-5 tablespoons minute tapioca
- 2-3 generous splashes of Worcestershire sauce

Do not brown the meat. Combine all ingredients in a large baking dish with a tight-fitting lid or cover securely with foil. Bake in a 250 F oven for 5-6 hours. Do not hurry this stew. The slow oven is the key to success.



ONE-POT PRIMAVERA

- 4 skin-on, bone-in chicken thighs
- 1 pound small red potatoes, halved
- 1 pound Brussels sprouts, trimmed
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon olive oil, or as needed
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 (1-ounce) package of ranch dressing mix
- 6 slices bacon, chopped

Preheat the oven to 400 F. Place chicken thighs in a 9-by-13-inch baking dish.

Toss potatoes, Brussels sprouts and garlic together with olive oil in a bowl until vegetables are lightly coated. Add vegetables around and between chicken thighs in the baking dish. Season with salt, pepper and thyme. Evenly pour the entire packet of ranch seasoning over the chicken and vegetables. Sprinkle chopped bacon on top.

Bake until chicken is no longer pink at the bone and the juices run clear, 30 to 35 minutes. An instant-read thermometer inserted near the bone should read 165 F.

Set an oven rack about 6 inches from the heat source and preheat the oven's broiler. Place the baking dish under the broiler, and cook until chicken skin becomes golden brown and crisp, 2 to 3 minutes. 🍳

ONE-PAN CHICKEN PASTA

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1/4 cup panko breadcrumbs
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon minced garlic, divided
- 1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups chicken broth
- 1 1/2 cups crushed tomatoes
- 8 ounces penne pasta
- 1/2 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
- 1/4 cup shredded Parmesan cheese
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large broiler-safe skillet over medium-high heat. Add panko and 1 teaspoon garlic. Cook, stirring, until the panko is golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to a small bowl and set aside. Wipe out the pan.

Heat the remaining 1 tablespoon oil in the pan over medium-high heat. Add chicken, Italian seasoning, salt and the



remaining 1 tablespoon garlic. Cook, stirring frequently, until the chicken is no longer pink on the outside, about 2 minutes. Add broth, tomatoes and penne. Bring to a boil and cook, uncovered, stirring frequently, until the penne is cooked and the sauce has reduced and thickened, 15 to 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, position an oven rack in the upper third of the oven. Preheat the broiler to high. When the pasta is cooked, sprinkle mozzarella over the penne mixture. Place the pan under the broiler. Broil until the mozzarella is bubbling and beginning to brown, about 1 minute. Top with the panko mixture, Parmesan and basil.



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