BROADBAND

FROM PAGE 1A

"I hear from those people throughout our county every day," he said. "I hear those voices that say they're forgotten, they're overlooked and not heard."

For those households, the investment could mean access to services that residents in better-connected communities routinely take for granted, from remote employment and online education to telehealth appointments and digital commerce.

Ruth Conley, general manager and chief executive officer of Foothills Communications, said the federal funding makes it possible to reach places where the economics of broadband construction have historically discouraged investment.

"We all know building in the mountains isn't easy or cheap, and without grants like this, many of these areas might never have the opportunity for reliable broadband," Conley said.

She emphasized that the cooperative understands those challenges because it serves rural communities itself.

"We know there's a lot of work ahead of us," Conley said. "Building fiber in eastern Kentucky can be tough, but reaching rural communities that might otherwise be left behind is exactly what Foothills was created to do."

The USDA describes the funded project as a combination of fiber-to-the-premises and hybrid fiber-coax infrastructure designed to deliver high-speed internet to the designated service area.

The federal award does not provide broadband coverage to every household in Martin County. Conley said, however, that Foothills envisions a much larger expansion over time.

"And while this grant is an exciting first step, we hope that it's just the beginning of what we can accomplish here," she said. "Our long-term goal is to continue building beyond these grant areas and eventually make our fiber service available to every home and business in Martin County. We know that won't happen overnight, but it's certainly what we're working toward."

The announcement builds on a $3 million Foothills investment announced in 2024. Combined with the federal award, the two announcements represent approximately $14.4 million in broadband funding and investment for Martin County.

Lafferty indicated that additional investments could follow.

"From discussions with her, they ain't done yet," he said of Conley and Foothills. "They're just getting started, and other investments are coming along the way."

The county has worked with Foothills through the judge/executive's office and the Martin County Economic Development Authority, helping the cooperative find space for a permanent local presence, providing letters of support and advocating for funding.

James Ayers, chairman of the Economic Development Authority, described broadband as essential to the county's ability to compete economically.

"For generations, geography has presented challenges to economic growth in Eastern Kentucky," Ayers said. "High-speed fiber helps erase that disadvantage."

He said reliable connectivity would let residents pursue remote work and build businesses without leaving their home communities.

Lafferty made a similar case, saying modern communications infrastructure matters to economic development as much as industrial buildings and manufacturing facilities.

"When we talk about economic development, we often think about new business, jobs, buildings and manufacturing, but one of the most important things we can do is build the infrastructure that makes these opportunities possible," he said.

The judge/executive also raised concerns about access to emergency services in remote communities, including police, ambulance and fire protection. Officials did not specify how the broadband project would affect emergency communications or response times.

Attendees at Tuesday's announcement included state Rep. Bobby McCool; Adam Rice, representing U.S. Rep. Hal Rogers; USDA Rural Development State Director Travis Burton; USDA public information director Greg Thomas; Ayers; Deputy Judge/Executive Carolea Mills; and representatives of Foothills.

For Conley, the federal award represents an opportunity to take broadband infrastructure deeper into Martin County's mountains while laying the groundwork for future expansion.

"Most of all, we're excited to get to work and continue building on what we've already started here in Martin County," she said. "And we look forward to reaching even more families and communities with the same reliable fiber service everyone has the right to expect."

SNAP

FROM PAGE 1A

tance Program benefits in September 2026, down from 1,472 in October 2025. The 206-household decrease represents a 14% decline.

The reduction also meant fewer federal food assistance dollars flowing into the county. Monthly SNAP benefits fell from $467,554 in October 2025 to $401,139 in September 2026, a decrease of $66,415.

The average monthly benefit per household remained nearly unchanged, falling from $318 to $317.

The decline was not steady throughout the period. After falling during the first several months, participation stabilized over the summer before dropping sharply in September.

Between August and September alone, participating households fell from 1,338 to 1,266, a decrease of 72 households. That one-month reduction accounted for approximately 35% of the county's total net decline since October 2025.

The figures come as Gov. Andy Beshear raises concerns about the effects of changes to federal SNAP policy.

In an Oct. 14 letter to U.S. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins and another to Kentucky's congressional delegation, Beshear reported that 80,622 fewer Kentuckians received SNAP benefits than in October 2025, including 24,655 fewer children and 6,572 fewer seniors.

Beshear attributed the statewide decline to changes enacted under President Donald Trump's 2025 federal tax and spending law, which expanded SNAP work requirements and made other changes to the program.

"We should be fighting hunger, not causing it," Beshear said in a statement calling for federal action.

Statewide, the number of households receiving SNAP benefits fell from 307,115 in October 2025 to 266,058 in September 2026, a 13.4% decrease. Martin County's household decline was slightly larger at 14%.

However, Martin County is one of five Kentucky counties exempt from the federal SNAP work requirement for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs).

Under federal rules, an ABAWD is generally an adult ages 18 through 64 who is physically and mentally able to work, does not live in a SNAP household with a child younger than 14, and does not qualify for another exception.

In counties without a waiver, those adults generally must work, volunteer or participate in approved employment and training activities for at least 80 hours a month (about 20 hours a week) to continue receiving food assistance beyond three months in 36 months.

The 2025 federal law expanded the age range subject to the time limit from 18–54 to 18–64. It also narrowed the dependent-child exception and eliminated automatic exceptions previously available to veterans, people experiencing homelessness and certain former foster youth. Other exceptions, including pregnancy and physical or mental limitations that prevent work, remain in place.

Martin County's exemption means the additional three-month ABAWD time limit does not apply to eligible residents during the waiver period, even if they do not meet the 80-hour monthly requirement.

According to the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, the exemption took effect Dec. 1, 2025, and also applies to Elliott, Lewis, Magoffin and Wolfe counties. The exemption was approved under the federal rule allowing waivers in areas with unemployment rates exceeding 10%.

The Kentucky ombudsman's annual report confirms that the five-county waiver runs through Nov. 30, 2026.

The waiver does not eliminate SNAP's separate general work requirements. Certain recipients must still register for work, accept suitable employment when offered and comply with other employment-related rules unless they qualify for an exception.

Households must also continue meeting income and other eligibility requirements and complete required reviews to maintain benefits.

Whether any Martin County SNAP recipients lost benefits because of work requirements despite the county's exemption remains unanswered.

To determine how many Martin County SNAP cases closed in September and whether any closures involved federal work requirements, the Mountain Citizen contacted the local SNAP office in Inez.

An employee said the office could not answer the questions and referred the reporter to Frankfort.

The reporter then called Frankfort and repeated the questions but received no answers. Instead, the person who took the call directed the reporter back to the SNAP office in Inez.

The reporter subsequently visited the Inez office in person, where employees again said they could not answer the questions.

Neither office provided the number of cases closed in September or information establishing whether any closures involved the ABAWD time limit despite the county's exemption.

The state's publicly available SNAP dashboard reports monthly participation totals but does not identify why households leave the program.

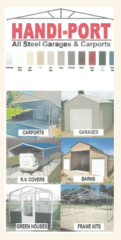
The 72-household decline in September represents a net change, not necessarily the total number of cases closed. Some households may have entered or reentered the program in the same month, so the actual number of closures could be higher.

Without case-level information, it is impossible to determine how many households lost eligibility because of changes in income, missed recertification deadlines, work requirements or other circumstances.

The data establishes that fewer Martin County households received food assistance in September. What it does not establish — and what state officials have yet to explain — is why.

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