

## **From our CEO: Seasons of gratitude and progress**

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Greetings! I must admit, we are in my favorite time of the year. The temperatures have dropped a bit; there's just enough chill in the air to need a jacket. Football season is well underway, kids are going to homecoming, and the holiday season is ahead of us. Halloween. Thanksgiving. Christmas. New Year's. All of it wrapped up into one cozy season, with an undercurrent of togetherness and gratitude.

And there is so much to be grateful for.

I'm grateful for my WCTEL family. In October, our employees and their families came together for a tailgating party during an Erskine College game. It's a Saturday afternoon filled with good old-fashioned fun — Frisbees, lawn games, barbecue and football. Whenever I see our extended WCTEL family, I'm taken aback by what we collectively represent: citizens, volunteers, sons, daughters, parents, neighbors, friends and leaders, with WCTEL being our common thread. Each employee possesses a spirit of service and dedication to our customers and members — and each other. And when combined, we are indeed a family and a powerful force for good in our communities. The entire board of directors and I do not take that lightly. We bear great responsibility in taking care of them, so they can take care of you.

I'm also grateful for our communities. Make no mistake: this pocket of South Carolina is colorful, vibrant and vital. From our beautiful lakes and campgrounds, such as Hester's Bottom, which boasts breathtaking views and tranquility, to community festivals and celebrations, this area is alive. And we're honored to keep it connected with high-speed fiber internet.

Our board of directors is continually looking at ways to bring more value to our employees and communities. One example of this is our new Volunteer Time Off policy, which grants each employee two days of paid leave to volunteer and serve. We had employees recently volunteer at the Second Harvest Food Bank, and this holiday season, many of them will be supporting a number of organizations throughout our service area that provide goods and services to

families in need during the holiday season. Their service isn't limited to organizations, though. In short, we're challenging them to help where help is needed. As an organization, we support many initiatives. But when you combine that support with the boots-on-the-ground service of our people, that's where the real impact is made.

Lastly, I'm grateful for progress. When I think back to what telephone service did for our communities, it was a game changer. Now, I step back, and I look at our 100% fiber network, and I wonder, "How could we possibly top this?" We have campgrounds and state parks with state-of-the-art, blazing-fast internet. We have remote lakes that are not just beautiful and full of fish, but they're connected to the world through internet. We have some of the best restaurants in the state right here at home that run on our service, making credit card transactions seamless and post-COVID touchless menus a breeze. We have families moving in from out of state, because they saw a home for sale on Zillow that came with acreage and fiber internet. We've had Realtors tell us that fiber sells homes. I contend that it doesn't sell homes; it makes a life. Remote careers can be had right here that would not have previously been possible. Telemedicine is connecting our veterans to their doctors.

The progress has no end. We are continually exploring ways to improve our customer experience, better our communities and innovate. Who knows where we'll be in 10 years? Chances are, we'll have gone very far ... without leaving home.

And THAT is the beauty of being a part of this family. YOU are a part of our family. Your future generations are, too. Together, we are building today and connecting it to tomorrow.