



Federal Communications Commission  
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Office of Communications Business Opportunities

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**Title: FCC Small Business Spotlight: OCBO Interview with Carolina West Wireless**

Greetings from the Federal Communications Commission.

The FCC's Office of Communications Businesses Opportunities (OCBO) acts as principal advisor to the Chairwoman and the Commissioners on issues, rulemakings, and policies that affect small businesses. As part of that mission, OCBO engages with the small business to community to hear their concerns and challenges, and bring their perspectives to the Commission's work.

In this month's Small Business Spotlight, OCBO is sharing an interview with Carolina West Wireless CEO, Slayton Stewart. Carolina West is small North Carolina wireless carrier that is working to serve residents in rural areas, including areas impacted by Hurricane Helene.

*Jeff Tignor*

Acting Director, Office of Communications Business Opportunities

**Small Business Spotlight on Carolina West Wireless, Mr. Slayton Stewart**

***Q: How did you get into the telecom business?***

**Mr. Stewart:** "For many small wireless carriers, entering the telecom industry often begins by identifying an unmet need for reliable, local service in rural or underserved areas. This need is frequently recognized by community members, and local entrepreneurs who see that larger carriers may not prioritize certain regions due to factors like lower population density or challenging geography. Smaller carriers like ours often start by building close relationships within these communities, securing infrastructure, and expanding gradually from a local foundation".

"In western North Carolina, for example, four telephone cooperatives joined forces to participate in the original 850 MHz spectrum lottery, aiming to protect their landline services from competitive pressures. Over time, this collaboration led to the creation of Carolina West, which has since grown to become the largest and most successful subsidiary of these cooperatives. Today, Skyline Telephone and Surry Telephone are the remaining owners of Carolina West Wireless".

"Personally, I entered the wireless industry 26 years ago, after working as a VP of Finance and Controller in the insurance sector. At that time, the wireless industry was in its early stages and experiencing rapid growth, offering both an exciting challenge, and the promise of innovation. I saw a unique opportunity to join American Cellular Corporation, based in Schaumburg, IL, and eagerly transitioned to the telecom field".

***Qs: Has being a small business in the telecom industry helped you serve customers in ways that maybe larger providers couldn't? If so, how?***

**Mr. Stewart:** “Absolutely. Being a smaller provider allows us to be closer to our customers, enabling us to adapt quickly to their needs in ways that larger companies may struggle to do. This proximity enhances our customer service—we can respond more rapidly to service issues, and make targeted improvements based on direct customer feedback. Unlike national providers, we focus on specific communities, which gives us a deeper understanding of the local landscape, including unique coverage challenges. As a result, we can offer more customized solutions that meet the specific needs of our customers”.

“Additionally, being rooted in the communities we serve, means, we live and work alongside our customers. Many of us, grew up here, and we actively participate in local events, from MerleFest to Mayberry Days, the Apple Festival, and the Woolly Worm Festival, as well as many smaller community gatherings. Our local presence also extends to our retail locations, allowing us to be even more accessible. This connection enables us to tailor our promotions, and service offerings to the unique characteristics of the rural areas we serve”.

***Qs: What benefits are there to the telecom industry of large providers having competition from small providers? Better pricing for customers? Others?***

**Mr. Stewart:** “Competition from smaller providers is crucial for a balanced, and healthy telecom industry. It helps keep prices competitive, benefiting both consumers and businesses. Smaller, local carriers play an essential role in expanding coverage into rural areas that might otherwise go underserved. For instance, Carolina West is the sole provider of mobile voice, and broadband service for over a third of our network. Smaller providers also offer more convenient locations for service options through local retail and service centers, often tailoring services with features like payment drop boxes and drive-through service. By working closely with local governments and organizations, smaller carriers can deliver reliable coverage where its most needed, filling critical gaps left by larger providers. This dynamic encourages innovation and provides consumers with more choices”.

***Qs: How has Carolina West contributed to the hurricane recovery? Is that process still ongoing?***

**Mr. Stewart:** “Carolina West Wireless has been actively engaged in recovery efforts following the impact of Hurricane Helene. Our primary mission was to restore and maintain essential network connectivity; allowing customers and emergency responders to communicate during this critical time. At the height of the storm, 70% of our network was down due to severe weather damage, power outages, and telecom disruptions. However, through swift and coordinated action, we were able to restore the majority of our network within 48 hours, and within a week, over 85% of the network was operational, enabling nearly all customers to resume normal usage”.

“In the wake of this devastation, our network recovery was only the first step. We are now fully committed to supporting the physical and emotional recovery of our communities. We recognize that the journey to recovery will be long, but we’re here to support it every step of the way”.

“Our rapid restoration efforts were made possible through coordination with both national carriers and smaller regional partners. We want to extend our heartfelt gratitude to our partners, who played an invaluable role in this recovery process:

- **National Carriers** – AT&T, US Cellular, T-Mobile, and Verizon provided essential collaboration through the mandatory disaster response initiative to identify areas without coverage. This allowed Carolina West to prioritize network restoration efforts in those areas where we are the only provider. Resulting in a faster recovery for each community.

- **Small Carrier Community** – Special thanks to Appalachian Wireless, C-Spire, NexTech, Skyline Telephone, Surry Telephone, and Wilkes Telephone, who provided manpower, backup generators, and other vital resources to help us restore service as quickly as possible.
- **Local Emergency Responders** – Collaborated closely with our team to ensure that communication services were prioritized for the area’s most in need”.

“As we look beyond network restoration, we remain dedicated to being an ongoing presence as our communities rebuild, providing the support and resources they need to fully recover from this disaster”.

*Q: What are some of the opportunities for smaller providers in the telecom industry going forward?*

**Mr. Stewart:** Regional carriers, like Carolina West Wireless, have unique opportunities to expand 5G service in rural communities, which helps bridge the digital divide and provides critical access to education, remote work, and healthcare—particularly for first responders who depend on reliable connectivity. Extending broadband into unserved, and underserved areas is one of the most powerful ways smaller providers can make a difference, often filling coverage gaps that larger carriers might overlook.

Government initiatives such as the 5G Fund and reforms to the Universal Service Fund present vital opportunities for smaller providers to enhance their infrastructure and expand their reach. Smaller carriers can also take advantage of advancing technologies like 5G and fiber as these become more accessible, bringing next-generation connectivity to regions that have long been overlooked. Furthermore, partnerships with local businesses and governments can enable smaller providers to lead in community-centered projects, such as smart city initiatives and IoT deployments, which reinforce their market presence and foster economic development in the communities they serve.