

Comcast commits \$1 billion to help close the digital divide as Americans increasingly rely on the internet

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Comcast Corp. plans to spend \$1 billion over the next decade to help low-income Americans connect to the internet, company officials said

Wednesday.

The Philadelphia cable giant said the money would go toward wiring community centers with WiFi, donating laptops and computers, awarding grants to nonprofits working with low-income Americans, and continued investment in its Internet Essentials program, a low-cost broadband service. Comcast estimates that the \$1 billion investment could affect 50 million people.

Comcast announced the commitment on the 10th anniversary of Internet Essentials, launched in 2011 as a condition to federal approval of the company's purchase of NBCUniversal. Comcast continued the reduced-cost broadband program beyond its three-year commitment, which would have ended in 2014. The program offers home internet service to low-income customers for \$9.95 a month.

"We are rededicating ourselves to this mission to ensure that the next generation of students in America has the tools, resources, and abilities they need to succeed in an increasingly [digital world](#)," Dave Watson, CEO of Comcast's cable unit, said in a statement.

The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the necessity of internet access, with millions of Americans relying on broadband to work or study from home. A February 2021 survey by Consumer Reports, a consumer advocacy group, found that 76% of Americans agreed that internet service is as important as electricity or water service in today's world. A nearly equal percentage (75%) said they rely on the [internet](#) every day.

As the coronavirus closed schools and offices, Comcast offered 60 days of free service for new Internet Essentials customers, opened its vast network of business and outdoor WiFi hot spots for public use, and partnered with school districts to connect kids online.

But elected officials and activists have called on Comcast to do more during the crisis, criticizing Internet Essentials' [slower speeds](#) and demanding the company open residential WiFi hot spots for school children. The company has said those residential networks were not engineered for broad [public use](#).

Comcast recently doubled download speeds for Internet Essentials to 50 megabits per second (mbps) and increased uploads from 3 to 5 mbps. Download speeds reflect how quickly you can receive data, such as loading web pages or streaming videos. An upload speed is how fast you can send data, such as using a video chat to talk to someone.

The company said the program has connected 10 million people across the country and more than 520,000 Philadelphia residents since 2011, including more than 9,000 who were connected at no cost through PHLConnectED, a partnership including the city and school district. Comcast does not share current enrollment numbers.

In Philadelphia, Comcast has opened more than 40 "Lift Zones"—community centers connected to free WiFi—to give students safe spaces for virtual learning while their guardians are occupied. The company aims to open roughly 1,000 across the country by the end of 2021.

Meanwhile, Comcast's broadband business has continued to boom during the pandemic. Its cable unit added a record 1.6 million customers in 2020, helping push its 2020 fourth-quarter profits to \$3.4 billion, an improvement of 6.9% from a year earlier.

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