

Comcast announces largest expansion of its internet services for low-income families

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Comcast on Tuesday announced the largest expansion of its discounted internet services for low-income families since the program started in 2011 and estimates that an additional three million households could be eligible nationwide.

The company now says it's opening the Internet Essentials door to anyone who qualifies for a welfare program, substantially taking the service beyond its initial mission of helping low-income families with school-age children.

The changes address criticism that Comcast made the program so restrictive in its initial years that it didn't go far enough in closing the digital divide, or the gap between low-income people who can't afford the internet and those who can.



Iona Livingston, a student at Peirce College, uses Comcast's low-cost service for low-income families at her home in West Philadelphia, on Friday, Aug. 5, 2019. Comcast hopes more college s ... [Read more](#)
JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

by Susan Snyder
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Among those groups targeted are low-income college students, like Iona Livingston, who began using the service after [Peirce College](#) in Philadelphia launched a pilot program with Comcast in 2017. Livingston, 53, who is studying for a certificate in medical coding, used to do her class assignments at the Center City insurance company where she works.

"It helps a whole lot," she said. "I don't have to worry about leaving here late. I'm able to run home, eat, get myself comfortable, go to my laptop, and sign in. It makes it so much easier."

Comcast launched Internet Essentials eight years ago, offering families whose children qualified for free lunches access to the internet for \$9.95 a month, about one-fifth the regular cost. (Internet currently costs about \$53 a month for regular paying customers in Philadelphia, including modem rental.)

Two million households and eight million people have been connected to the service in cities and towns covered by Comcast — two million of them in the last year, the company said. In Philadelphia, 72,000 households representing an estimated 288,000 people have signed on since 2011. That's the third-highest number, behind Chicago and Houston, Comcast officials said.

Comcast does not disclose figures on how many of those who signed up over the years remain users. Company officials said their role is to make the connection, and it's impossible to know why people quit. Some may move out of Comcast territory or opt for higher speeds as their finances improve.

The company also does not disclose how much it has spent on the program but notes that over the last eight years it has invested \$650 million in digital literacy training for 9.5 million people.

Since the program started, Comcast has expanded criteria for the offering a dozen times, to families [whose children qualify for reduced lunches](#), to Head Start, to those in public housing, [to senior citizens](#) in pilot areas, and [last year to veterans](#).

But this week's announcement, said David L. Cohen, senior executive vice president of Comcast, is the largest expansion and may be the last one.

"I don't know who else we expand to," he said. "With this expansion, we have extended the benefit of the program to the entire target population we want to reach, low-income Americans living within our footprint."

There are seven new eligibility criteria including anyone on Medicaid. The others are: SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; SSI: Supplemental Security Income; LIHEAP: Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program; WIC: Women, Infants, and Children; and Tribal Assistance: including Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.

In addition to low-income college students, Comcast officials expect the expansion will reach more low-income people with disabilities, who may not live in public housing or have children in school, and seniors who hadn't previously been in pilot programs.

Expanding the criteria alone won't increase the number of users, he acknowledged.

"As we go on, these people are [harder and harder](#) to reach and harder and harder to connect," Cohen said. "There are real barriers to adoption."

Cohen cited fear of the internet, lack of computer equipment and cost. To combat those barriers, as part of the program, the company has sold more than 100,000 discounted computers and conducted the digital literacy programs.

As with other expansions, Comcast will look to partner with companies and institutions that can get the word out about the service, Cohen said. Company officials are about to embark on a tour to several cities, starting in Miami, to tout the expansion.

Locally, the impact has been significant, Cohen said. In Philadelphia, from 2013 to 2017, the broadband adoption rate grew from 65 percent to 72 percent, he said. He attributed half of that growth to Internet Essentials.

Not all the company's efforts to broaden access have worked, Cohen said. Comcast's pilots with community colleges didn't gain much traction, he said, perhaps because college students have access to computer labs and libraries.

The pilot program with Peirce, however, went well, he said, noting that more than 50 students have signed on.

"It is an added value for those students who perhaps never had access outside of their work and would like it at home," said Peirce president Mary Ellen Caro.

Peirce serves a nontraditional student body. The average age of students is 35 and 60 percent qualify for Pell grants targeted at low-income students.

With the new expansion of eligibility, Comcast officials said they won't need more pilot programs with colleges because low-income students will be covered.

Cohen said that since the program started he has heard from many users who say having internet at home has made a difference. He cited a woman in Chicago whose son stopped skipping school and started thinking about college after he got a computer to do his homework. Another, he said, saw her children's grades improve and went back to school for her GED, with the goal of becoming a schoolteacher.

It made a difference for Livingston, the Peirce student, too.

Livingston said she had to give up cable and internet when she went from two jobs to one. She learned about the Comcast program at Peirce.

"I feel like I get a lot more done with my assignments," she said.

This story also appeared in Government Technology on Aug. 7, 2019:

<https://www.govtech.com/network/Comcast-Pledges-Affordable-Internet-for-the-Welfare-Eligible.html>