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BCAP NewsClips

May 26, 2021

WJAC-TV, Johnstown
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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
TechCrunch is coming to Pittsburgh to hear from startup founders

Seattle Times
Amazon's relentless pace is injuring

About a year after accelerating its commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion efforts across its service territory, Comcast offered an update on its progress, adding that its programs targeted to help low-income communities and minority-owned enterprises have helped thousands of students, employees and small businesses, and are on track to do more this year and beyond.

Comcast said in June 2020 that it would accelerate its commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, which occurred one year ago Tuesday (May 25), and in that time has made strides to support businesses owned by people of color and create new job opportunities. In the past year Comcast has opened hundreds of Lift Zones across the country and expects to connect more than 1,000 this year, helping students, seniors, veterans, and others have access to free internet and the tools needed to complete homework, participate in digital skills training, and apply for jobs.

The company added that its Comcast RISE program, which launched last fall, will award 13,000 small businesses owned by people of color across the

warehouse workers and violating the law, Washington state regulator says

The Hill
Activists join call for Facebook to drop 'tone-deaf' Instagram for kids plan

TVNewsCheck
Fox Nation To Stream Fox News Primetime

Philadelphia Inquirer
Pa. GOP lawmaker Doug Mastriano says he left the Capitol area before the riot. New videos say otherwise.

Associated Press
Pennsylvania firm drops out of Arizona GOP's 2020 election recount

Spotlight PA
Newly empowered, Pa. GOP lawmakers move to end parts of Wolf's coronavirus disaster order

country with grants, technology upgrades, and marketing services by 2022. Comcast has also worked to improve employment diversity throughout the company at every level, pointing to its NBCU Academy, launched in January, which provides underrepresented students with training, experience, and scholarships.

In addition, the company noted it has committed $1 billion over the next 10 years to help close the digital equity gap, reaching an additional 50 million low-income Americans in that timeframe to ensure that communities of color have the skills and tools necessary to succeed in the digital economy. "Ultimately, across all that we do, our mission remains the same – we connect people to what matters most," Comcast chairman and CEO Brian Roberts said in a blog post. "We use our platforms and resources to help elevate potential and provide everyone with access to the opportunities they need to succeed." – ***Next TV***

Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-Ill.) has introduced a bill, the No Rate Regulation of Broadband Internet Access Act (H.R. 3346), that would prevent the FCC from regulating broadband access rates. Kinzinger introduced the bill four Congresses ago, where it passed the House. This time around, the bill comes as Republicans are preparing a counter offer bill to President Joe Biden's $1.7 trillion infrastructure package, which includes more than $100 billion for broadband deployment. The Biden plan funds municipal networks and makes price and competition part of the calculus for where broadband is considered to be available.

That means that if there is insufficient competition or the service is deemed too costly, it might not qualify as "available" broadband so that either the FCC could regulate rates or the government could allow broadband deployment money to be used for overbuilding existing service, something cable and other ISPs are strongly against. "While the federal government can and should continue to provide resources to help with the build-out of broadband in those hard to reach areas, regulating service rates will only destroy this investment model—one that has brought access to over 90% of Americans and, frankly, helped prevent a devastating blow to our economy during the pandemic," said Kinzinger of the bill. "If we want to build upon this progress, we must ensure that the government is not setting the rates Americans pay to use the internet."

In promoting the infrastructure package, the White House has been painting a glass-half-empty portrait of broadband availability, including speed and competition and price in the definition of broadband issues that need $100 billion in subsidy money to address. For example, in talking points, the Administration said that in New York, almost a third of people who live where "there is only one broadband provider" offering at least "minimally acceptable speeds." And even where broadband is available, the White House said, it "may be too expensive to be within reach." Then it talks about 13% of New York households without an internet subscription, though it does not say whether that is because they can't get it or can't afford it or don't want it. – ***Next TV***

It took the U.S. government more than a year to allocate and begin distributing $3.2 billion in emergency funding to help tens of millions of people afford internet access that they arguably need now more than ever. But the real challenge is what comes next: Making sure that money gets to the people who need it most before it all dries up.

Since the FCC began doling out the Emergency Broadband Benefit earlier this month, internet giants and digital equity advocates alike have been scrambling to educate the least connected Americans about it, while pressing Congress to top off the fund or even make these broadband subsidies permanent. "We're really building the plane as we fly," said Daiquiri Ryan, policy counsel at the National Hispanic Media Coalition.

The Emergency Broadband Benefit gives low-income Americans and people who lost their jobs during the pandemic up to $50 off their monthly internet bill. People living on tribal lands are eligible for up to $75 off. But the communities that could most benefit from such a discount are often the hardest to reach. Normally, when the government undertakes an effort to educate millions of hard-to-reach Americans — as in the Census or an election — it has years to prepare and sometimes billions of dollars to spend on awareness campaigns. Getting the word out about the Emergency Broadband Benefit is a little like that, said Brandon Forester, a national organizer for internet rights at the nonprofit MediaJustice, except "we don't have a 10-year plan, and we didn't have hundreds of millions of dollars in federal and local funding to try to reach those folks."

There are a number of reasons why giving money away isn't as easy as just giving it away. For starters, there's a government verification process applicants have to go through to prove they qualify. For some, including people who are already enrolled in the FCC's Lifeline phone subsidy program, that approval may be instantaneous. But for others, like, say, people who don't have a Social Security number or people who miss a step on their application, the verification gets kicked over to manual review. That can lead to dramatic drop-offs in application completion rates. "We're really trying to train digital navigators who will be helping people enroll to expect that," Ryan said.

Then there's the issue of simply translating forms, websites and other materials into as many languages as possible, in order to help reach non-English speakers and immigrant communities. Even once those translations are finished, that doesn't always guarantee they'll be easily understandable to people who aren't familiar with technology. "For example, 'broadband.' There is a word for that in English, but most immigrant populations don't even know what that word is in their language," said Emily Chi, assistant director of telecommunications, technology and media at Asian Americans Advancing Justice. Chi said AAJC pushed the FCC to call it simply "internet" in marketing materials. "It's a trial and error process," Chi said. "We have to see what feedback we're getting from the community and come back to the drawing board."

Particularly in Latinx communities, Ryan said, it's critical to craft marketing messages that reach young people, who often act as translators in their families and liaisons to government programs. "Our goal is to get out culturally relevant content," Ryan said. That means using apps such as Facebook and WhatsApp as well as "memes and conversational Spanish, not formal government Spanish" to get the word out. All of this work requires funding — funding that's not included as part of that $3.2 billion. "All the local outreach that's happening, folks are finding ways to pay for it or using existing resources," said Angela Siefer, executive director of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance.

NDIA, for one, received funding from Comcast to develop a webinar series where NDIA trains its local affiliates, including community groups, libraries and housing authorities, in how to get people signed up. A crucial part of that process is cutting through the mistrust that people have about government services and internet service providers, by explaining the protections that exist within the Emergency Broadband Benefit. "There are lots of reasons why someone might say no to free internet," Siefer said, citing problems with hidden fees.

The Emergency Broadband Benefit was designed to mitigate potential abusive behavior by internet service providers. When the benefit funding is about to run out, for example, ISPs are required to inform their customers, who would then have to actively opt in to continue service, rather than being automatically enrolled in a more expensive package. Still, reports have already surfaced of ISPs behaving badly. The Washington Post reported last week that Verizon is requiring existing customers who want access to the Emergency Broadband Benefit to enroll in a new, sometimes more expensive, plan. A Verizon spokesperson told the Post the benefit can only be applied to "qualified plans,"

which are designed to save customers money over older bundles. "There's really no story here. We're on the side of the customer and want to ensure they pay for what they need, and not for what they don't," Verizon told the Post.

ISPs do have an important role to fill in disseminating information about the benefit. Massive corporations have infinitely more resources than advocacy groups do and an existing pool of customers who they can market to directly. "We're actually communicating [about the Emergency Broadband Benefit] extensively to non-customers and existing customers alike," Charter spokesperson Rich Ruggiero told Protocol. "We're sharing information and helping enroll qualified households through a variety of channels, including online, via phone and in our Spectrum stores."

In addition to the funding it gave NDIA, Comcast is working with national networks of grassroots groups, including the Black Churches for Broadband Coalition and the Hispanic Technology and Telecom Partnership. Despite these outreach efforts, advocates and ISPs alike share one big fear, worrying that the $3.2 billion in funding will run out even faster than it was allocated. "We're definitely concerned by the time we can get the word out and get our communities aware, it's only going to be one or two months before the money runs out," Ryan said. "Everybody's best guess is it will last for 6 months," said Jenna Leventoff, senior policy counsel for Public Knowledge, which has been lobbying lawmakers on the Hill to include additional funding for broadband subsidies in any forthcoming infrastructure package.

Support is also growing for making such subsidies permanent. That includes support from ISPs, which benefit directly from having more people connected to the internet, regardless of who's paying for it. "There are some people who are concerned we're just doing a giveaway to the ISPs. That's not looking at this with the right frame," Leventoff said, noting that consumers ultimately benefit from receiving discounts on internet service. "That view is cutting off your nose to spite your face."

Comcast, for one, told Protocol that it "supports the effort to create a permanent broadband benefit program that complements low-income adoption programs like Internet Essentials." So far, adoption of the emergency broadband benefit looks promising. The FCC recently said that it had enrolled more than 1 million households in the program in its first week. "The high demand we've seen for the Emergency Broadband Benefit program demonstrates what many of us already knew to be true — too many families are struggling to get online, even in 2021," acting FCC chair Jessica Rosenworcel said in a press release. Still, there are those who worry about what that means for people who don't know the benefit exists, and whether there will be anything left over by the time they find out. "Because there's not a national effort to make sure we're not missing folks, folks are going to get missed," Siefer said. "That's just a fact." – ***Protocol***

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