

NBCUniversal Content Distribution

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**Pottstown
(Montgomery Co.)
Mercury
Toomey, Mensch
help untangle red
tape to get
computers for
Pottstown schools**

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Cable Cos. Cry Foul
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Blue Ridge Communications has extended its temporary suspension of data caps for all internet speed levels until June 30. In conjunction with PenTeleData, Blue Ridge is providing open access to its Community Wi-Fi hot spots until June 30. A list of Community Wi-Fi hot spot locations is available online at www.ptdwifi.net.

For customers that contact Blue Ridge to express that they have been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, Blue Ridge customer care specialists will be able to provide flexible payment options and will not disconnect services or assess late fees until June 30. To allow students to continue their lesson plans and online learning without interruption, Blue Ridge extended its Learn From Home Initiative. Families with students that are currently enrolled in this program received an additional month of internet service at no cost, along with unlimited data until June 30. The previously announced video rate increase originally scheduled for April 1, then rescheduled to June 1, will now be delayed until further notice.

Blue Ridge Retail Centers will remain closed until further notice. Customers can drop off payments at their local office (drop box) but processing time could take up to three days. You can always manage your account at www.brctv.com, or through our My Blue Ridge app, or by calling 1-800-222-5377. For updates, see www.brctv.com/blog. – **Lehighton Times-News**

A \$150,000 grant was awarded to SEDA-Council of Governments (SEDA-COG) to supplement its ongoing high-speed internet access efforts to three rural counties. The U.S. Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) grant will help fund wireless networks in Juniata, Mifflin, and Perry counties where it's not financially feasible for internet service providers to reach on their own.

John Brown, SEDA-COG's executive director, said this is a critical service needed especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. "We are thankful this grant award comes during the time it is most needed, with many people working from home, and businesses needing this essential internet service," Brown said. "That's why we're here — to meet businesses and communities' needs through every type of economic reality."

Scott Kramer, SEDA-COG's principal Information Technology specialist, said reducing the cost of providing broadband helps close the gaps for rural areas. "The key is to incentivize the internet service providers to provide broadband services to our rural areas," Kramer said. Based on meetings with counties and Federal Communications Commission data, the target areas for the wireless networks include the Village of Honey Grove in Juniata County, the South River Road area (southwest of McVeytown) in Mifflin County, and the Horse Valley Road area in Perry County.

The project will incentivize internet service providers in expanding their service to speeds of 25/3 or better to at least five businesses and 210 households. It will help retain 18 jobs and create two new jobs. SEDA-COG will provide a total of \$147,000 per county to internet service providers from the ARC grant and low-interest revolving loans. Per county, the ARC grant will be used as \$47,000 reimbursable grants for internet service providers and the loans total \$95,000 from the Pennsylvania Keystone Communities Program. SEDA-COG published the request for proposals on March 6 and collected proposals from internet service providers today, May 1.

SEDA-COG works to enhance the quality of life and economic advantage for residents and businesses in 11 central Pennsylvania counties through its partnerships and initiatives. SEDA-COG also is an advocate for the interests of its communities at the state and federal levels. – **Sunbury Daily Item**

A nonprofit outfit in Pennsylvania and a private company from West Virginia — both in the broadband business — are partnering to bring high-speed internet access to a poorly served area of southwest Pennsylvania.

The nonprofit Keystone Initiative for Network Based Education and Research, of Harrisburg, and Morgantown-based ClearFiber Communications are planning to string an 81-mile broadband cable through parts of Washington and Greene counties and Waynesburg University. That cable, which is expected to serve more than 2,000 homes, will offer 100 gigabit capability and is scheduled to be ready by early 2021, according to Nathan Flood, Kinber's interim director and CEO. The 81-mile cable will end near California, Pa., where Kinber already provides service to California University of Pennsylvania. "Other organizations have expressed interest in connecting," Mr. Flood said. "There are other opportunities that we haven't finalized yet."

Greene and Washington counties are rural or semi-rural parts of southwest Pennsylvania with spotty or slow internet speeds, according to a study last year by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a Harrisburg-based nonprofit. Although Kinber doesn't serve residential customers, its maximum speed of 100 gigabit of data transfer per second — or 100,000 megabits — is exponentially faster than the average internet speed in Greene County of 7.2 megabits per second or Washington County, 10.3 megabits per second.

The Federal Communications Commissions defines 25 megabits per second as broadband access. Slower speeds can mean extended time downloading information or images from the internet, making research difficult for students and reducing the quality of Netflix movies. The public-private partnership was made possible by a \$200,000 grant organized through the office of state Rep. Pam Snyder, D-Greene County, who said she'd been working on pulling together the project for well over a year. "When it finally came together, I had tears rolling down my cheeks," said Ms. Snyder, an outspoken advocate for expanding broadband services to rural Pennsylvania. "We must find solutions to these problems. This is every bit as important as water, sewer, electricity."

Kinber, which was established in 2010 with a \$99.6 million grant from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, is a nonprofit membership organization that's dedicated to expanding digital access for research and education. The University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon and Duquesne universities and Community College of Allegheny County are among Kinber clients.

Although Waynesburg University "already has excellent broadband service," Stacey Brodak, vice president for institutional advancement and university relations, said in an email that the new line will be a fiber backbone necessary to bring broadband to businesses beyond the university. The cable will stretch from California University of Pennsylvania through Washington, Pa., continue south through Waynesburg and eventually end in Morgantown. ClearFiber will construct the mostly overhead cable, with Kinber sharing line capacity.

— **Pittsburgh Post-Gazette**

A few states are allowing some voters to cast ballots over the internet in coming elections, overriding concerns from cybersecurity experts about tampering or technical glitches as election officials grapple with voting amid the [coronavirus pandemic](#). At least three states—Delaware, New Jersey and West Virginia—will allow small slices of their electorates to use an online voting tool in presidential primaries or local elections.

Those eligible chiefly include voters who are overseas, in the military, or sick or disabled. Particularly for those overseas and in the military, they would ordinarily vote by mail but that option could be hindered by the pandemic's disruptions to postal services. At least two of these states looked into the option before the pandemic, and supporters say their efforts could promote

wider adoption of online voting, particularly as states grapple with containing the pandemic.

The move, if limited, shows how the pandemic is forcing some election officials to weigh protecting public safety along with cybersecurity in ways that seemed far-fetched a few months ago. With the new coronavirus expected to present a public health threat for months, many states are already expanding vote-by-mail balloting. Pandemic-related disruptions to international mail may fuel still more interest in online options for voters overseas, election officials said.

Heading into the 2020 voting season, election officials saw cybersecurity as their chief challenge—a view reinforced after the Iowa Democratic caucuses were botched by a faulty vote-tallying app. Experts say those concerns still apply, and U.S. security and intelligence agencies continue to warn that Russia and others are likely to interfere in the presidential election.

When it comes to internet voting, “there are a number of really hard problems,” said Dan Wallach, a computer-science professor at Rice University. Those include, he said, the difficulty of protecting voters’ personal devices and the importance of keeping ballots secret. Election officials in the three states said that their use of voting by internet is carefully considered, weighing cybersecurity with the need to help certain groups of people vote. “Anytime you use an online application for banking, government services, health care or even voting, there is a security concern. But we believe that the risk is small compared to disenfranchising voters,” West Virginia Secretary of State Mac Warner said.

West Virginia is allowing disabled and overseas voters to vote in the June primary via an internet-voting option that was announced before the pandemic but that officials said has since become more critical. All three states are using a cloud-based system from Seattle-based election technology firm Democracy Live, Inc.

Delaware will allow the electronic option for voters who are overseas, sick or disabled voters for its June presidential primary. It had been considering the option before the pandemic, said Anthony Albence, the state election commissioner. New Jersey’s disabled voters will also have the cloud-based option in May 12 local elections, which are exclusively vote-by-mail because of the pandemic, said New Jersey Division of Elections spokeswoman Alicia D’Alessandro.

Bryan Finney, Democracy Live’s founder and chief executive officer, said that the system has been tested repeatedly by security researchers, including in a pilot program for a local election in the Seattle area earlier this year, and that the company is pursuing additional security reviews. Using Democracy Live’s system, voters access a portal to retrieve a ballot. They can submit the ballot through a cloud-based system—where election authorities can retrieve it—or print it and return it by mail or at a drop-off site.

Mr. Finney said he doesn’t use the term “online voting,” calling his product a document-storage solution. “The online-voting thing is such a hot rail,” he said. “It can actually do more damage when you start using that loaded terminology.” Security experts including Rice’s Mr. Wallach dismissed that reasoning because the process uses an online portal. “The idea that their system isn’t an internet voting system is laughable,” said Joe Kiniry, an election-security expert and principal scientist at technology firm Galois.

Delaware’s Mr. Albence defended the system, saying it is secure and that when ballots are downloaded by election officials a paper version is generated. Election officials said the vote-by-mail option has downsides, such as mailing delays or international service stoppages caused by the pandemic that could make limited internet voting more attractive to some states.

Disruptions to international mail are “an evolving picture that we’re trying to stay ahead of,” said David Beirne, director of the Defense Department’s Federal Voting Assistance Program, which helps military voters and Americans living overseas cast ballots. Some foreign postal administrations aren’t currently accepting any international mail from any country, a spokesman for the U.S. Postal Service said. Approximately 20 states require overseas voters to use physical mail to submit ballots, while the rest allow fax or email—which cybersecurity experts say also poses concerns. Mr. Beirne said overseas voters from mail-only states should act early and suggested using mail services offered at embassies or consulates.

At this point, internet-voting efforts are expected to affect only a fraction of voters. In the 2018 midterm election, for instance, only 144 military and overseas voters from West Virginia used a different mobile-voting option in a pilot program. Supporters of mobile voting believe the small pilots are a step toward wider adoption and that it will eventually increase voter turnout. “We just have to keep proving it in different places and different ways,” said Bradley Tusk, the venture-capitalist founder of Tusk Philanthropies, which has provided funding for several pilot projects, including the one in Seattle. — *Wall Street Journal*

Stay safe



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