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The FCC released its initial list of companies and other entities interested in participating in its massive \$20.4 billion Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), which is designed to provide government money to telecom companies willing to build Internet networks in rural areas.

Noteworthy names among the [dozens of entities registering interest](#) appear to include Verizon, SpaceX, Windstream, Altice, **Charter Communications**, Cox Communications, Frontier Communications, Starry, ATN International, Consolidated Communications, Hughes Network Systems, Rise Broadband, **Atlantic Broadband**, Midco, Madiacom Communications, Redzone Wireless, CenturyLink, Rise Broadband, U.S. Cellular and Viasat. Other, smaller companies on the list include a wide range of regional and rural telecom providers ranging from Miwave to Mercury Wireless to Paul Bunyan Rural Telephone Cooperative to Shenandoah Cable Television to Union Telephone Company.

The FCC appears poised to accept a wide range of participants. For example, cable companies like Altice and Cox are listed alongside telecom providers like CenturyLink and Verizon, while fixed wireless providers like Redzone and Rise Broadband are also listed. Importantly, satellite Internet providers like Viasat, SpaceX and Hughes Network are also on the list. The FCC has [expressed some concern](#) about whether new providers like SpaceX – which has not yet launched commercial low-Earth orbit (LEO) satellite Internet services – should be allowed to participate in the RDOF. But after some lobbying by SpaceX, the FCC appears to have allowed the company to participate.

The FCC's release of initial interested entities is a first step in the agency's overall process. Next, the agency must release a final, official list of bidders. Then the FCC will launch the first phase of the RDOF event, Phase 1, in October. That first phase will allocate \$16 billion for roughly 6 million homes and businesses in census blocks that the agency said are entirely unserved by voice and broadband. Bidders must supply services of at least 25Mbit/s download speeds. The FCC's RDOF program is a reverse auction where companies and entities that submit the lowest bid for covering a particular area win – however, then they're on the hook to cover that area with broadband services.

The FCC's initial list of interested RDOF participants includes entities with both complete and incomplete applications. However, entities with incomplete applications will have a chance to submit completed applications. The exact identity of RDOF participants is sometimes difficult to discern because some companies participate under "bidding entity" names that may not align with their corporate brand. For example, Rise Broadband is participating under the Skybeam bidding entity. – **LightReading**

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As millions of students are heading back to school virtually from the comfort of their own homes, two girls in California relied on a Taco Bell's free WiFi to access their coursework from the restaurant's parking lot, according to a county official.

The reality was captured in a single photo that has made its rounds on social media, shining a light on the [digital divide](#) in the United States. [In the photo, two girls can be seen sitting on the sidewalk of a Taco Bell](#) with computers in their lap and a pencil and paper on the pavement in front of them. Two Taco Bell employees can be seen in front of them, with one crouching down to meet them at eye level.

Approximately 15 to 16 million K-12 public school students in the United States live in homes with inadequate internet connection, or have devices that aren't equipped for distance learning, according to a [study](#) from Common Sense Media and the Boston Consulting Group published in [June 2020](#).

Monterey County Supervisor Luis Alejo [tweeted the photo](#) after seeing it on Instagram, saying, "we must do better & solve this digital divide once & for all for all California students." "California is the technology capital of the world, this is an embarrassment," he told CNN. "Salinas Valley is 45 minutes from Silicon Valley, and here we have such a huge divide that's gone on for years but now it's only amplified because of this pandemic."

Alejo said that he does not know who the students are in the photo and that he couldn't confirm what led them to go to Taco Bell but said the photo speaks to the bigger picture of the reality many students and families face. "We know that there is thousands of other kids in a similar situation. In Salinas, there's a lot of homes and a lot parents who don't even know how to use computers or how hotspots work."

Richard Gebin, public relations officer for the Salinas City Elementary School District (SCESD), told CNN that the Salinas City Elementary School District immediately identified the students after seeing the photo circulate. "The digital divide is very real and delays in receiving needed technology are a statewide concern," Amy Ish, president of the Salinas City Elementary School District, said in a statement. "We are grateful the state is making technology a priority and look forward to receiving these hotspots in our district."

For privacy and security concerns, the district would not identify the students or their parents. The district gave the family a hotspot so the students could access classroom instructions from their home, according to Gebin. The district is in full distance learning mode and said it has distributed 8,245 Chromebooks and 1,500 hotspots and is awaiting 2,500 additional hotspots. "Technology is so critical, and we cannot view it as a luxury, it's a necessity of life, it should be seen as a utility like water, electricity and gas," Alejo said.

In a statement, a spokesperson for Taco Bell Corp. told CNN that "the photo of two young girls outside of a Salinas, CA Taco Bell is a tough reminder of basic inequalities facing our communities." "We and our franchisees have always been passionate about supporting youth education, and the owner of this restaurant is looking into additional ways to support these students and the broader community," Taco Bell said in an email statement.

Though the digital divide is a problem throughout the entire country, in California, 25% (1,529,000) of the state's K-12 student population don't have the adequate connection and 17% (1,063,000) don't have the adequate devices for distance learning, according to research from the Common Sense Media and the Boston Consulting Group. California is second to Texas in the states with the highest number of students without adequate access. — **CNN**

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Wednesday is the first day for Philadelphia's public schools and it is certainly unlike any other in our lifetime. While we won't see young people boarding a bus or walking to school, full of excitement, we take joy in knowing that our students will be starting a new year of learning and growth.

Thanks to the incredible effort of our administrators, educators, support staff, and many others, the school year is starting as planned, with students logging online to meet their new teachers and classmates. When the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, we realized we had to create a whole new rulebook for making sure students learn during this pandemic, and we know what we have is not perfect. So that's why we want to be upfront about what we're doing, who is involved, and where we'll need help from you—Philadelphians—to make sure this works.

Thankfully, we are Philadelphia—a city that comes together when times get tough. A city that understands that NO child should be without reliable internet. This spring, leaders from Philadelphia's business community, non-profits, and charitable foundations offered their support. First, we distributed more than 85,000 Chromebooks to students in need of devices, and then we hunkered down, determined to find a way to put our children and youth on the best educational path forward.

Born out of this effort was [PHLConnectED](#)—an initiative that will provide up to 35,000 Philadelphia families with internet service at no cost to them until at least June of 2022. PHLConnectED was made possible by the creative thinking, collaboration, and significant commitment of time, financial resources, and talent of numerous City agencies, the School District, charter school leaders, and other partners. Comcast Corporation, The Lenfest Foundation, The Neubauer Family Foundation, The Philadelphia School Partnership, The William Penn Foundation, Hess Foundation, and the Philadelphia Housing Authority all play a vital role.

Together, we set out to build a program that is easy to access and will work for Philadelphia families who still need high-speed internet in their homes. This is achievable through Comcast's Internet Essentials program, the longest-running broadband adoption initiative in the country, and by providing T-Mobile Wi-Fi hotspots for those experiencing housing insecurity. We provide the equipment and speeds needed for our children to be successful in online learning—all for free.

It will still be a challenge to help some families cross the digital divide. Communities of color, non-English speakers, and those in low-income neighborhoods face innumerable barriers that are the result of systemic societal inequities. PHLConnectED seeks to overcome these internet adoption challenges by providing an equitable digital solution for our students and their families. Establishing a reliable internet connection requires several steps including getting a router or hotspot, a laptop or tablet, and human support to make sure all of the technical elements work the way they should. PHLConnectED provides all of these necessary ingredients for a reliable connection, but we need your help to spread the word.

Last week [we launched 211](#), a simple way for families to learn about PHLConnectED and sign up. Just dial 2-1-1 from any phone and press option 1. The team is available 24 hours a day and is ready to walk anyone with a K-12 student through the process to obtain free internet. Nothing will replace in-person teaching and learning in a classroom. But we are confident that today, as Philadelphia's students start the school year digitally, Philly's children are poised to learn, grow, and work toward their dreams.

Help us make this a reality for *all* students. Share the 211 hotline and encourage people to sign up. Support our school children by instilling confidence in them about this new way of learning. And support our teachers, who are also stepping up to this challenge and exploring creative new ways to successfully engage with their students. Solving a crisis as vast and as complex as the digital divide will require a team effort on an unprecedented scale. Please join us so we can ensure our students have the most successful school year imaginable. — **Op-ed by Philly Mayor Jim Kenney (D) and William Hite, Jr., Ed.D., Superintendent of The School District of Philadelphia, in *Philadelphia Inquirer***



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