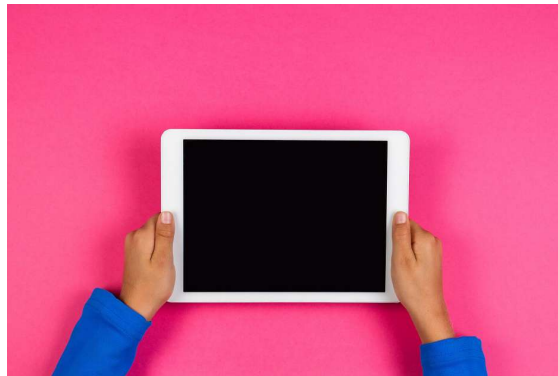


Opinion // Open Forum

# Internet providers must take lead on closing digital divide

By Barbara O'Connor and John Chiang Sep. 5, 2020 Updated: Sep. 7, 2020 11:09 a.m.



*illus Photo: Getty Images / EyeEm*

We have all seen the images and heard stories: students without Internet access sitting in parks, parking lots or [fast food restaurants to use public Wi-Fi](#) to do homework. COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders illuminated how essential it is to be connected to the internet for education, healthcare work, and even public safety. Once again, it is the neediest residents who are being left out, particularly low-income communities of color.

In California, 22% of residents remain [unconnected or underconnected](#) at home and [one in five students lack access](#).

While learning continues online for kids with high-speed home internet, it has come to a screeching halt for those without access, widening the opportunity gap. In valiant attempts to get all students connected, some school districts are paying Internet Service Providers (ISPs) lucrative amounts for hotspots. However, hotspots don't solve the problem if the underlying internet infrastructure is inadequate or nonexistent. And, if it doesn't work for online learning, then it also doesn't work for telehealth, telework, or emergency warnings. The existing internet patchwork system falls short in speed and geographic availability, missing for about a third of the state's land area. Our elected

representatives must authorize funding and invest now in building a ubiquitous high-speed internet network for all Californians.

Gov. Gavin Newsom's recent [executive order](#) directing state agencies to address the digital divide is a great start. But leadership must go beyond government.

ISPs such as AT&T, Charter, Comcast, Cox, Frontier and T-Mobile can immediately overcome a barrier to success for millions of disadvantaged residents by joining forces with the state to close the digital divide. ISPs have responded to the health crisis with interim free offers and flexibility on late fees, but they need to do more. While all ISPs — except Verizon, which needs to step up — offer reduced-cost home Internet service for low-income households, the pandemic has revealed that they are inadequate and anemic.

It is up to the ISPs to lead and deliver.

First, ISPs must improve their affordable offers to provide sufficient speeds and data to support distance learning and doctor visits — basic necessities. Where internet infrastructure is sufficient, ISPs can improve its affordable offers while retaining a cost in the range of \$15-20 per month. They also need to follow Comcast to extend their free interim offers for new low-income customers through the end of 2020.

Second, ISPs need to remove barriers to signing up low-income households, beginning by welcoming them with respect and not upselling them. ISPs need to train and reward their call center personnel to actually help unconnected folks sign up for service on the first call, which should take no more than 30 minutes (not hours).

While AT&T and Frontier are willing to switch existing customers who become eligible for their affordable offers, Charter and Comcast require customers to drop current service for 30 and 90 days, respectively, before allowing them to sign up for an affordable subscription. ISPs also need to advertise a telephone number instead of a website, which is absurd for people not online.

Third, ISPs need to increase advertising to raise awareness by eligible households. We call upon the ISPs to invest in a sensible "Triple Play" target: \$30 million in 30 days to sign up 3 million people (about 750,000 households). ISPs simply should intensify their ad spending in a concentrated period to promote its affordable offers in proportion to their statewide market share. They claim to want to get everyone connected; this is the way to prove it.

Finally, we must forge a genuine public-private partnership. The state should assist the ISPs by distributing information about introductory free and affordable offers to everyone

on the National School Lunch Program, CalFresh, Covered California, and CARE (energy utilities). In return, ISPs should report their progress in enrolling low-income households. We must pursue this action plan with the sense of urgency it deserves.

After all, Internet access is a 21st century civil right.

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