

Testimony
Illinois House of Representatives Economic Justice & Equity Committee
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Comcast Closing the Digital Divide through Internet Essentials

Good morning!

Chairwoman Wallace and members of this Committee, thank you for the invitation and for the chance to appear before you today. My name is Kay Page. I work in Government Affairs and Community Investment at Comcast. In my work, I focus on communities between Aurora, Rock Falls, Coal City and Kewanee.

I'm here today to tell you about our long-standing efforts to eliminate the digital divide. In fact, it's one of our major corporate goals. I'm one of the many Comcasters in Illinois - from Rockford to Quincy to Chicago - and across the nation whose priority is to make this happen.

Seven years ago this month, in August of 2011, at Chicago's Woodson Library, Comcast first announced the Internet Essentials program to the nation. Internet Essentials is the nation's largest and most comprehensive initiative to eliminate the digital divide. Through the program, eligible families can get high speed Internet service at home for \$9.95 per month. Internet Essentials helps remove the barriers that make it difficult for low-income families to take advantage of the academic, economic and other opportunities that come with a high-speed-internet connection.

Here are some statistics about broadband penetration in Illinois that frame the conversation:

- **77%** of all Illinois households subscribe to broadband at home. **92%** of Illinois households with annual incomes **greater than \$75,000** have a broadband subscription at home.
- On the other hand, **only 54%** of Illinois households with annual incomes less than \$35,000 have a broadband subscription at home.

- That **38-point difference** illustrates the breadth of the digital divide in Illinois.

From the outset, we recognized that affordable connectivity and computers, along with free digital literacy training designed to build relevant skills, would foster adoption. That was the basis of our thinking when we created Internet Essentials.

- Again, through the program, we provide broadband Internet service at home to eligible families for \$9.95 per month, plus taxes. There was and still is an option for enrollees to purchase a computer for \$150. We don't check credit. We don't charge installation fees. And we haven't raised the rate since the program began.
- We've continually enhanced the program. We increased the download speed four times over the last seven years - to its current 15 megabits per second. In addition, we added free in-home WiFi, so participants can access the Internet throughout their homes. And recently, we gave participants 40 hours of free access per month to our Xfinity WiFi network, which includes more than a million WiFi hotspots in Illinois and 19 million in locations across the country.
- Initially, to qualify, families had to have a student in kindergarten through 12th grade, who received free lunches at school through the National School Lunch Program, or N-S-L-P. Later, we expanded the program to include students receiving reduced-prices lunches through the N-S-L-P as well.
- In addition, we opened the program to Illinois public housing residents and Illinois community college students who receive Pell grants.

I'm proud to say that since its inception in 2011, Internet Essentials has helped more than four million low-income Americans gain access to the Internet at home, many who otherwise wouldn't have been able to afford it - or would have had to make a choice between Internet service and another expense. In Illinois alone, Internet Essentials has helped more than 480,000 residents connect to the Internet at home.

I'm also proud that Internet Essentials did exactly what it set out to do. In a recent survey, we found that...

- 93% of Internet Essentials participants said they feel the program has had a positive impact on their child's grades; and
- 62% said the service helped someone in their household look for or obtain employment.

Moreover, because of Internet Essentials, children don't have to go out in the elements to a library or a fast food restaurant in search of Internet access to do their homework.

Parents looking to provide better lives for their families now have a resource at their disposal to apply for assistance, to register for continuing education courses and to look for employment.

Learning tools and games are now available to help stimulate the brain and excite the entire family about the possibilities of their future.

Much of this has been made possible by the creation and expansion of the Internet Essentials program.

All told, since the program started, we've invested more than \$300 million in digital literacy training and broadcast more than 8.5 million PSAs, valued at more than \$110 million, to spread the word about Internet Essentials.

But that's only part of the picture. We recognized early on that to make real progress closing the digital divide, we would need to partner with community-based and faith-based organizations, school districts like the Chicago Public Schools, and a host of other stakeholders. Since then, we built a network of around 900 community partners in Illinois that not only help us spread the word about Internet Essentials, but also advise us on ways to strengthen the program. Many of them have even partnered with us to provide digital literacy training.

Some of our strongest partnerships are in Peoria. We not only partner with the Peoria Public School system and its Parent University Program, we also created a tremendous relationship with the Peoria Dream Center. Each year, the Dream Center hosts an event that helps 3,000 kids get ready for school. Comcast was an early sponsor and supporter of this event. The goal behind our support was to make sure that families know

about Internet Essentials and understand how it could impact their child's academic success.

In Chicago, last year, we announced a \$250,000 grant to establish "Internet Essentials Experience Labs" at three Chicago Public Library branches on the South and West Sides. The labs provide a place for community organizations and other providers to deliver services to library patrons, ranging from workforce and digital skills training to lifelong learning programs - all in an environment that offers access to innovative technology and the Internet.

Examples of other community partners we work with include:

- The Boy and Girls Club of Springfield;
- The League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC;
- The African American Men of Unity Organization in Aurora;
- The Chicago Public School System, through which we've distributed more than 400,000 informational flyers to students each year;
- The Chicago Urban League; and
- The Chicago Public Library.

I am personally proud of Internet Essentials and the work I've done along with our community partners to close the digital divide. Together, we've raised awareness of the program, assisted families in enrolling, partnered to educate grammar and high school students, made it just a bit easier for a Community College student to stay in school and opened up a world of possibilities to CHA and other public housing residents across the state.

But there's a lot more we need to do. We look forward to expanding our relationship with each of you, and determining how we can work together to make a difference in the lives of your constituents.

Again, I thank you for your time, and look forward to our continued dialogue on the topic of closing the digital divide.