



EXPAND THE CONNECTING FAMILIES PROGRAM TO COVER ALL LOW-INCOME PEOPLE

The need for expanding the Federal Government's Connecting Families to ALL low-income people is greater than ever! Governments – federal and provincial – have called for social/physical distancing during the ongoing health emergency due to COVID-19.

However, staying at home requires access to the internet for anything and everything anyone can imagine. Not only is it essential for parents who need it to teach their children through online classes, but low-income seniors and other low-income people need it equally to stay connected with their families & friends, stay updated and informed, buy groceries, avail government benefits, access their bank accounts and much more!



**ACORN CANADA IS AN INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF
LOW- AND MODERATE-INCOME FAMILIES.**

**FOR MORE DETAILS, CONTACT US AT
CANADACORN@ACORNCANADA.ORG**

CANADA'S DIGITAL DIVIDE

The issue of digital divide cannot be overemphasized, especially during a pandemic like this, as internet becomes a lifeline for most people.

- As per the United Nations estimates, approximately half the world's population is not connected to the internet, and the situation is grim even in developed or better-connected countries.
- In 2018, a study by the Ministry of Innovation, Science and Economic Development (ISED) confirmed that Canada has some of the highest wireless prices in the world.
- The Public Interest Advocacy Centre says that Canadians pay two to three times more for internet and mobile phone data than do those in other OECD countries.
- Only one third of the lowest-income families have the Internet at home (The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, Communications, CRTC Monitoring Report 2018).

ACORN's 2019 SURVEY

In 2019, ACORN reached out to 500 people to understand internet related issues. These findings assume greater significance in light of the present crisis.

- 83% people had home internet services, and home was identified as the place that respondents most frequently access the internet.
- 60% had accessed the internet at home using a cell phone. More than half used a laptop, and around 40% used a desktop computer. Over 65% of respondents used multiple devices to access the internet.
- Despite the high number of respondents who reported having used the internet, more than one third said that a lack of home internet access has been a barrier to completing tasks online.

COST IS THE BIGGEST BARRIER



- Low income people with household incomes of \$30,000 or lower were less likely to have home internet access than those with incomes over \$60,000 (80% vs. 96%.)
- Only 76% of respondents with household incomes below \$10,000 had home internet access.
- Almost 50% of people paid over \$70 /month for internet services. This number was the same for respondents with household incomes below \$30,000.
- Cost was found to be so prohibitive that people had to forgo internet services at home. Of the 78 respondents without home internet, 72% identified cost as the main reason.
- In addition to the high monthly cost of internet, almost one-third reported paying extra fees for exceeding their data allowance.

Internet vs. Other Necessities

Many low-income Canadians found themselves in the difficult position of deciding whether to pay for home internet (and the opportunities it provides) or pay for basic necessities such as food, clothing or transit.

A quarter told us they have sacrificed food in order to pay for internet services and almost one third have made multiple sacrifices. Overwhelmingly, people said they think internet services are too expensive. This opinion was higher in households with no children (91%) compared to households with one or more children (84%).

INTERNET USE

- The most common activity that people reported using the internet for was to connect with friends and family or use social media. Almost 80% of respondents reported using the internet for this purpose.
- Almost three quarters of respondent told us they used it for entertainment purposes or access information and news, while around half use the internet to access government services and apply for jobs.

In times of a health crisis, the importance of staying connected and informed cannot be overstated. The fact that most people reported using the internet to connect with family and friends is critical.



BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

ACORN has been working with low- and moderate-income Canadians to win affordable internet and close the digital divide. ACORN members delivered 400 testimonials to the hearing, highlighting the issue of internet access, leading to the CRTC's historical declaration in 2016 that broadband internet access as a basic service. ACORN members continued to fight for affordable internet as the declaration fell short of announcing any subsidy for low-income people.

The Connecting Families Program

In 2018, the Ministry of Innovation launched the Connecting Families Program which will be available until March 2022. Targeting the National Child Benefit recipients, the program enables some eligible Canadian families to access high speed Internet service packages for \$10 per month (plus tax) with at least 10 Mbps download speed and a minimum of 100 GB of data usage. In addition, the program has a component of distributing upto 50,000 computers to eligible households.

BUT, the program FALLS FAR SHORT, especially during this time when everyone needs reliable, affordable internet

- It is eligible only to some families who currently receive the maximum Canada Child Benefit - thus covers only SOME low income parents with children.
- It leaves out thousands of other low-income people such as seniors and people from other vulnerable communities who are equally in need of affordable internet.
- The program's success is contingent upon voluntary contribution of internet service providers. As per ISED, Eastlink isn't participating due to cost concerns. Internet resellers and satellite companies are also not participating.
- The internet speed is too slow for families with multiple children or multiple needs for the internet.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

We cannot wait until 2030 to access affordable internet. The crisis is NOW and therefore there needs to be an immediate response!

Low-income people across Canada, while isolating at home, urgently need unlimited internet access and affordable wireless plans to stay connected to vital services and everyday life.

A. Home Internet

CRTC and the telecom industry needs to do the following during the “pandemic and recovery period” and for 6 months thereafter.

For low-income Canadians and "fixed-income seniors":

- Offer all “low-income Canadians” and “fixed-income seniors” FREE “retail Internet access services” in accordance with the technical requirements of the federal “Connecting Families” program, but without regard to the household eligibility requirements.

• For all customers:

- a. Unlimited data at no extra cost;
- b. No overage charge” for data use;
- c. No price increases;
- d. No disconnection for non-payment, arrears or any other reasons.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

B. Cell Phone - Wireless Service Providers (WSP)

For “low-income” customers and “fixed-income seniors”:

All WSP should offer all “low-income” customers and “fixed-income seniors” the following:

- “mobile wireless services”, a \$30/month post-paid plan
Included: Phone number and voice calling (unlimited Canada-wide); texting (unlimited Canada-wide);
- Internet data (10 GB/month) at LTE (4G) speed. No “data overage” charges. Term: 1 year (no bundling).
- Device: Customer to bring their own access device (BYOD) and no credit check.
- No changes to plan or additional add-ons or price increases (including no charges for customer service calls or charges for paper bills) during the term of plan - which is 1 year.

For all customers:

- Doubling of all “data caps” at no extra cost;
- No “overage charge” for data use;
- No price increases;
- No disconnection for non-payment, arrears or any other reasons