

Position Statement: Low Income Broadband Access

Internet access, specifically broadband Internet access, is critical for anyone to keep up in modern American society. Everything from education, job seeking, banking and most government services are routinely offered online. The lack of a broadband connection puts people at a profound disadvantage. According to the 2014 Information Technology Access and Adoption in Seattle study, nearly all households surveyed reported that Internet services are very important. However, only about a quarter of the lowest two household income groups (under \$30,000) have cable internet, compared to two-thirds of households who make \$100,000 per year or more. There is clearly a digital divide, separated by economics.

Private Service Provider Plans

In our review of privately subsidized low income Internet service plans, we found that most plans had complex application processes making it difficult to participate in the low income plans while also not providing the bandwidth adequate for participating in the digital economy.

Our recommendations are:

1. For eligibility verification, we favor giving low income applicants the alternative of providing proof of participation in existing low income verification process such as DSHS to reduce the burden to and complexity to apply. Additional income verification options might include Medicaid, DSHS programs, Seattle City Light utility discount programs, or federal income tax forms. Current plans often rely on reduced lunch programs for students as the sole qualifier, thereby omitting participation by underemployed low income residents without children.
2. Allow low income residents to participate even if they are already an existing subscriber. Most current programs today are only valid for a new subscriber. Allow participation of low income residents whose past cable payments ended in arrears, providing they catch them up.
3. Provide a dependable single point of contact to support applicants in the signup process and/or partner with a local organization to provide the support.
4. Publish and share subscription statistics showing broadband adoption for low income residents.
5. Provide data speeds equivalent to modern day standards:
 - 5.1. For wired connections (e.g., cable, DSL, fiber), we recommend that the low income plans offer broadband speeds that match, at a minimum, the current definition of broadband as defined by the Federal Communications Commission. If and when the city of Seattle defines broadband, we recommend that internet service providers defer to that definition when determining broadband speeds for low income plans.
 - 5.2. Where services are advertised as unlimited, we recommend that no data caps or throttling are employed. If data caps are employed, overage fees should not be automatically employed.
 - 5.3. Connectivity for low-income plans should not discriminate. Like wired connections, we recommend that cellular connections are not two-tiered.
6. Allow low income residents to subscribe to a month-to-month option, rather than a long-term contract.

Public policy

There will always be an economic barrier for low income residents access to broadband Internet if the private sector cannot or will not provide reasonable means of low income internet access. Policy needs to be created to ensure that the appropriate pricing and subscription mechanisms are established.

Price is only one factor in closing the digital divide. Further investment is needed in programs such as the City of Seattle Community Technology to provide the education and outreach necessary to support to those

without access. Providers should be encouraged to provide or fund community education sessions at the local neighborhood and community centers, and Seattle Public Libraries.

Call to Action

We the Committee believe that as a City, we can do better to improve broadband access to all. Meeting the minimum bar is not good enough to check the box. We as policymakers and service providers are all responsible for doing our part to close the digital divide.

Citizens' Technology and Telecommunications Advisory Board