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CHICAGO LAUNCHES GROUNDBREAKING INITIATIVE TO BRIDGE DIGITAL DIVIDE, PROVIDING FREE HIGH-SPEED INTERNET ACCESS TO OVER 100,000 CPS STUDENTS

Public, Nonprofit and Philanthropic Leaders Develop \$50 Million Program to Provide Free, High-Speed Internet for Four Years

CHICAGO – Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot today announced the launch of ‘Chicago Connected,’ a groundbreaking program that will provide free high-speed internet service to approximately 100,000 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students in their households. This first-of-its-kind program will be one of the largest and longest-term efforts in the nation to provide free, high-speed internet over the course of four years to dramatically increase internet accessibility for students and help build a permanent public support system for families in Chicago.

“Reliable, high-speed internet is one of the most powerful equalizers when it comes to accessing information,” **said Mayor Lightfoot**. “It allows families to access digital remote learning and stay connected to family near and far, especially during COVID-19. It allows families to build career skills, apply for jobs, register to vote and stay up-to-date on current events. This program is a critical component of our STEP agenda and the efforts to end poverty and a part of our mission to drive improved academic outcomes at CPS.”

The City worked with CPS and philanthropist Ken Griffin to initiate a first-of-its-kind, scalable solution to address the digital equity gap. ‘Chicago Connected’ sustainably tackles the persistent access issue through a public-private investment in broadband, with philanthropic partners bridging the program’s initial costs. ‘Chicago Connected’ is estimated to cost approximately \$50 million over the next four years, prioritizing families in need on the city’s South and West Sides.

“Internet connectivity is a lifeline to education and opportunity – extending learning beyond the classroom and opening pathways for development and wellbeing,” **said Ken Griffin, Founder and CEO of Citadel**. “With ongoing access, every student and their family – regardless of economic circumstance – will be better positioned to



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pursue a brighter future. I hope ‘Chicago Connected’ will inspire other communities across the country to come together to eliminate the digital divide.”

The first two years of ‘Chicago Connected’ will be majority funded by philanthropic partners, including \$7.5 million from Ken Griffin, \$5 million from Crown Family Philanthropies, \$2.5 million from the Chicago Community COVID-19 Response Fund (through The Chicago Community Trust and United Way of Metro Chicago), \$2 million from Illinois Tool Works, \$1.5 million from the Pritzker Traubert Foundation, \$500,000 from The JPB Foundation and \$250,000 from the Joyce Foundation. An additional joint commitment of \$750,000 from President Barack Obama and Mrs. Michelle Obama, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and The Chicago Community Trust to the Children First Fund (CFF), the independent partnership and philanthropy arm for Chicago Public Schools, will support efforts by community-based organizations (CBOs) on the South Side.

“Inequitable access to the Internet is a nationwide issue and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that internet service can no longer be viewed as a luxury,” **said CPS CEO Dr. Janice K. Jackson.** “To build on our students’ academic progress, we are launching an unprecedented effort to provide stable, high-speed internet access to 100,000 CPS students over the next four years. This ambitious and critical undertaking would not be possible without the generous support of the philanthropic community.”

These generous commitments, along with \$5 million of CARES Act funding from the City of Chicago, will fund years one and two of the program. CPS will fund the program in years three and four of the initiative.

Providing Reliable High-Speed Internet Access to Students who Need it Most

According to Census data, an estimated 100,000 students lack access to high-speed internet in Chicago, which is defined as 25 mbps download and 3 mbps upload by the Federal Communications Commission. ‘Chicago Connected’ will provide high-speed internet for households for four years by directly paying for internet service for families that are most in need, using six priority indicators and data from Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to identify eligible households for the initiative. Priority indicators include students eligible for free lunch, students identified as having special needs, students experiencing homelessness and students living in communities with the highest hardship based on the [UIC hardship index](#). Further, Chicago Connected will prioritize students who are enrolled in summer school who are also eligible for the program.



'Chicago Connected' will begin outreach to families next week with the goal of connecting as many of the 100,000 students as possible prior to the 2020-21 school year. While Mayor Lightfoot and Chicago Public Schools remain committed to making every possible effort to get students back in the classroom this fall, what next school year looks like and how many students will be able to return is dependent on the trajectory of the virus and guidance from state and local health officials.

"The pandemic has not made the internet indispensable, but has revealed that it always has been," **said Daniel Anello, CEO of Kids First Chicago**, a parent advocacy organization that has supported the push for broader access to high-speed internet for families. "Increased internet access will provide a plethora of telehealth, economic and other ancillary benefits, in addition to closing the digital divide which contributes to a significant racial equity gap in our city."

While phase one of 'Chicago Connected' will primarily focus on providing wired internet access, Chicago Connected will also extend existing mobile broadband hotspot service for eligible students in temporary living situations (STLS) for up to four years.

Groundbreaking Initiative Made Possible by Generous Support from the Philanthropic Community

"Michelle and I want every kid in Chicago to grow up knowing even better opportunities than we had – and that requires full and equitable access to the best tools and resources. We're happy to help Chicago Connected reach every kid in the city. This is where I found a purpose and a family – and it'll always be our home." – **President Barack Obama**

"No student or family should be cut off from opportunities to learn, connect, and thrive—especially at this moment when our devices have become our classrooms, doctors' offices, and more. Chicago Connected represents a critical step on the path to equity for students city-wide." – **Barbara Goodman Manilow, Crown Family Philanthropies' Board Chair**

"This terrible pandemic has made it crystal clear that access to high speed internet is a critical element of our social safety net. Sadly, too many young Chicagoans and their families lack access to this powerful tool which improves educational, economic, social and health outcomes. The Pritzker Traubert Foundation is proud to support this vital program that will help connect nearly 100,000 of our young people to the many benefits that connectivity and collaboration can deliver." – **Penny**



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Pritzker, Trustee, Pritzker Traubert Foundation and former U.S. Secretary of Commerce

Critical Partnerships to Support Program Goals

'Chicago Connected' will provide connectivity by directly paying for a low-cost, high-speed internet service plan for families through Comcast and RCN. In order to help facilitate the payments and various program components, 'Chicago Connected' has enlisted United Way to serve as its fiscal agent to help administer the funds and monitor the program. By having United Way pay ISPs directly means that families will not receive a bill.

"Comcast launched Internet Essentials in 2011, because we understood the importance of digital equity across all of Chicago's 77 neighborhoods and across the nation. Since then, Internet Essentials has helped thousands of Chicagoans cross the digital divide and gain access to the Internet at home, many for the first time," said Matthew Summy, Comcast's Regional Vice President of External and Government Affairs. "We're proud to partner with Mayor Lightfoot, the City, CPS and all the other 'Chicago Connected' stakeholders to connect thousands more students and continue to help them succeed in school."

'Chicago Connected' will also enlist the support of various Community Based Organizations (CBOs) to support enrollment in the program, digital literacy and skills development training, and connect families with other critical resources. To support this effort, CFF — which will act as a fiscal agent for the work with CBOs — will launch an RFP process for CBO selection; more information will be available at cps.edu/chicagoconnected.

"RCN's mission statement includes the belief that we should take care of our customers and take care of each other. Because of our strong roots in the community, partnering with 'Chicago Connected' not only strengthens our commitment to Chicago but allows us to extend our best-in-class internet to those families that are in most need. We are proud to be a part of this innovative program that not only removes obstructions in the learning process for the students, but will enhance the overall well-being of these families," said Tom McKay, SVP and General Manager, RCN Chicago.

CPS currently provides hotspots through T-Mobile to many of the district's Students in Temporary Living Situations without a permanent home address. T-Mobile, AT&T and Verizon are also helping develop potential solutions in areas where traditional 'wired' access is not a viable option. This component of the program will take shape over the coming weeks in parallel with the launch of the wired initiative.



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“Broadband is a lifeline for many students from marginalized communities, and lack of access has repercussions that go far beyond the ability to complete homework assignments,” said 12th Ward Alderman George Cardenas. “If you have reliable Internet connection, you have opportunity. I thank Mayor Lightfoot for this investment that ensures CPS students can all engage in connected learning, and I look forward to our continued work to enact inclusive connectivity policies that center on communities of color.”

Chicago’s Larger Vision for Digital Equity

The first phase of ‘Chicago Connected’ is centered on digital equity and internet connectedness as a way to lay the foundation for success for students by increasing access to online learning, college applications, training and workforce development, and other critical government services.

“As Chairman of the City Council’s Committee on Education and Child Development, I have been a longtime proponent of improving the lives of all of Chicago’s children,” said 24th Ward Alderman Michael Scott. “Delivering broadband access to our students will have a profound impact on bettering the lives of our youth and their families.”

Expanding access to CPS households who need it the most represents the first phase of a larger effort by the City of Chicago to expand internet access more broadly. The City is evaluating additional ways to improve internet infrastructure investments in communities in need beyond CPS families and is dedicated to further exploring how to broaden ‘Chicago Connected’ to connect more families citywide.

“In 2020, giving young people access to the internet is necessary to provide them access to the classroom,” said 36th Ward Alderman Gilbert Villegas. “This is an awesome next step, and I feel confident that students, parents and teachers will see the result when school starts in the fall.”

For more information, please visit cps.edu/chicagoconnected.

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