

100,000 families enrolled in Comcast's discounted Internet

September 22 2012, by Bob Fernandez

After a slow start, Comcast Corp. says it has enrolled 100,000 poor families nationwide into its discounted Internet program.

Internet Essentials - offering Internet service at a 79 percent discount, or \$9.95 a month, to families with school-age children - remains a work in progress, [Comcast](#) says.

In early 2011, Comcast volunteered to offer Internet Essentials in its negotiations with the [Federal Communications Commission](#) to acquire control of NBCUniversal.

The program is designed to address the low adoption rate of broadband service in low-income neighborhoods - a result partly of the cost of an Internet service and a computer. In Philadelphia, for example, Comcast's least expensive stand-alone Internet service costs \$47 a month, which includes the modem rental, a company spokesman said.

Comcast says it has found that the biggest barrier to Internet Essentials' adoption is that many people in [poor neighborhoods](#) don't understand the Internet.

"They think it may be used for Comcast or the government to spy on them," said David Cohen, the program's chief booster and an executive vice president at Comcast.

Other officials say many residents believe that the discounted service is a

scam and don't apply, or haven't heard about it. Comcast has marketed the program through [school districts](#) and now says it is widening its contacts.

The [cable company](#) estimates that 2.3 million families nationwide are eligible for Internet Essentials.

If Internet Essentials were to match Comcast Xfinity Internet's 36 percent penetration, it would have 828,000 nationwide. Comcast reached the 36 percent market share over 15 years, Cohen noted.

The company, Cohen said, was seeking "respected voices" in communities to talk about the importance of the Internet to education.

"I love this program," said Cohen, a former chief of staff to then-Philadelphia mayor Ed Rendell. "I can't tell you how proud I am that we have signed up 100,000 families to the Internet."

Eligibility for Internet Essentials is based on whether a child participates in the federal free or reduced-cost lunch program. If a child participates, the [family](#) qualifies for Internet Essentials.

There are restrictions. A family does not qualify if it already subscribes to a Comcast Internet service or has an unpaid cable-TV bill.

One success story is the Independence Charter School in Philadelphia, which has 30 families enrolled in Internet Essentials.

Initially, "people thought it was too good to be true and a scam," said Richard Trzaska, chief executive officer of Independence Charter, an 800-student school.

To overcome that perception, Jenny Hoedeman-Eiteljorg, the school's

family and community partnerships coordinator, individually called the 275 eligible families to tell them that it was the real deal.

Sheerita Wilson, 25, of South Philadelphia, is one of the parents. Her son Zaahid is 7 years old. Wilson said she heard about the program on the radio and applied. She said her son was upset when he came home and could not have access to the Internet, which she says he uses for math and spelling. "You can't beat \$9.95 a month," she said.

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Citation: 100,000 families enrolled in Comcast's discounted Internet (2012, September 22)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2012-09-families-enrolled-comcast-discounted-internet.html>

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