

Comcast launches faster broadband, additional speed tiers in Gallup

Written by By Rachelle Nones Sun Correspondent
Friday, 19 November 2021 09:36



Free internet service is now available for low income, tribal land households

Due to Comcast's recent broadband upgrades, existing customers in Gallup can now access additional internet speed tiers, with speeds reaching up to 1.2 Gbps (1,200 Mbps).

"There's a digital divide and that is part of why we are focusing on offering the full speed tier in places like Gallup, to help close that digital divide." Comcast spokeswoman Julianne Phares told the *Sun*.

"One of the things we learned from the pandemic is that everyone needs access to broadband," Phares said. "Part of the reason we completed this upgrade as part of our planned upgrades across New Mexico, is to make sure that everyone has access to speeds like this."

Along with broadband providers such as Ting Internet, Verizon Wireless, Straight Shot Wireless and more than a dozen other Gallup broadband providers, Comcast is currently participating in the FCC's Emergency Broadband Benefit program. EBB is a limited-time program providing low-income households with a subsidized broadband connection during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualified households include tribal-land households and any household receiving housing assistance, SNAP, SSI, or assistance from other qualifying government programs.

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“Higher speed internet access is going to be helpful for those students who live in populated areas, but Comcast does not reach all of the students in the county,” Gallup-McKinley County Schools Superintendent Mike Hyatt said.

Gallup-McKinley County Schools is the largest school district in New Mexico. Students from multiple tribes, including the Navajo Nation, Zuni, and Pueblo tribal lands attend classes within the district.

“The problem is infrastructure in our area. You know, there’s been significant issues with high-speed internet coming into all of McKinley County, especially the rural areas where approximately 1600 of our students don’t even have cell service to be able to get the internet,” Hyatt said. “There’s zero cell service.”

The federal government grants funding for GMCS to provide high-speed internet for its schools, but that same funding cannot be used to pay for cell towers or landlines within the rest of the community.

“The tribal governments do get funding and we hope and wish that they would use that funding to provide for their cell towers or other infrastructure for their citizens,” Hyatt said.

According to the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, “In a landmark 2018 decision, the court ruled in Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico that the state was violating New Mexico students’ constitutional right to a sufficient education and that the state must invest in the programs and services necessary to close opportunity gaps and fix deep inequities for low-income, Native American, English Language Learner students, and students with disabilities.”

“We appreciate that people are finally paying attention to our student’s needs. Unfortunately, it took a lawsuit to get there,” Hyatt said.

GMCS was one of six plaintiffs involved in the Yazzie/Martinez lawsuit.

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“We were told by the state, after we sued the state and won, that they needed to provide us high-speed access,” Hyatt said. “They did an assessment and realized that the problem was worse than they thought and that it’s going to be a long-term fix and not a short-term fix in our area, due to the lack of infrastructure.”

Every GMCS student who attends class in person has been given a laptop or iPad device. However, in numerous student households, the lack of broadband infrastructure renders the devices useless when a student is working on classwork at home.

“We are almost two years into the pandemic and so it is going to take a period of time until the infrastructure technology is in place in our area, because our community has been left behind,” Hyatt said.

For those who benefit from the EBB program, it will last as long as the federal government provides funding. Comcast will provide enrolled customers with regular updates and notify them at least 30 days prior to the end of the program. At that time, those on the EBB program who wish to continue will be billed at Comcast’s standard monthly rates including any applicable taxes, fees, and equipment charges. Low income families on the plan can revert to a low income household plan of \$9.95 a month plus tax.

No program end date has yet been announced.

Details about the EBB program are available on the Federal Communication Commission’s website at: <https://www.fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit>.

To locate a participating broadband provider in your location, visit [GetEmergencyBroadband.org](https://www.getemergencybroadband.org)

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