



NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

San Mateo County Partnership Brings Wireless Connectivity to K-12 Students in Need

County partners with local school districts to create better access for remote learning

Redwood City — The County of San Mateo today announced a new and innovative partnership with local school districts that will bring high-speed internet access to thousands of students in rural communities and low-income households.

The initiative will address inequity issues for students who need to be connected to virtual learning at the start of the school year due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

To accomplish this ambitious goal, the County is partnering with Ravenswood City, La Honda-Pescadero Unified, Redwood City, and Sequoia Union High school districts to quickly deploy wireless connectivity to communities where students lack high-speed internet access in their homes.

By working with the school districts and using the latest census track findings, the County can use data that identifies areas of concern where access is limited or non-existent.

The County's data-driven approach takes into account the following: students who qualify for reduced-price or free meals, students where English is a second language, and students who are homeless or who have reported connectivity issues.

“There is a greater reliance on technology in the home that strains the resources of many families in our County,” said County Chief Information Officer Jon Walton. “We need to be vigilant in our efforts to make sure no student has barriers to accessing education.”

“We want students to reach the digital threshold that brings them access to the classroom and their classmates,” said County Manager Mike Callagy.

The Board of Supervisors at its Aug. 4 meeting voted unanimously to allocate \$2.879 million toward the project from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds.

“This project is critical not just for students but also their families. The pandemic exposed what we already knew — that so many in our community do not have access to the internet. Digital learning highlighted this digital divide and this pilot is an important step to bridge the gap,” said Board President Warren Slocum, whose District 4 includes all or portions of the Ravenswood City, Redwood City and Sequoia districts.

For qualified students attending schools in the Ravenswood City and La Honda-Pescadero Unified school districts, the County will subsidize the cost of Comcast “Internet Essentials” program (normally \$9.95 per month) for a total of 14-months, and provide free access to T-Mobile’s “Empowered Education” program which provides students with portable mobile wireless hot spots for distance learning through the end of the school year.

“Now more than ever, when students are attending school virtually due to COVID-19, every household in San Mateo County should have access to high-speed Internet service. It’s absolutely vital that we give kids the tools they need to succeed academically in these challenging times,” said Supervisor Don Horsley, whose District 3 includes areas with some of the highest levels of income inequality on the Peninsula.

The County is sponsoring a total number of 650 students for both Comcast and T-Mobile services for this pilot. In an effort to optimize connectivity in rural areas, the County is also in talks with other internet service providers in the event gaps in service delivery are found.

For students attending schools in the Redwood City and Sequoia Union High school districts, the County is looking to expand its existing SMC Public Wi-Fi network that will extend to areas that are densely populated by Redwood City students and their families where they lack internet connectivity.

This expansion will allow students to stay in or near their homes where they can safely connect to the internet for distance learning. The County is also using some of innovative technologies, including wireless Remote Deployment Units (RDU’s), which are essentially mobile wireless hotspots on wheels that can be parked anywhere, on-demand in areas of need. The goal is to have the expanded SMC Public WiFi wireless networks operational in the fall.

In addition, Comcast has also made its nationwide Xfinity WiFi hotspot network in outdoor and public locations available for free to anyone who needs them including non-Xfinity Internet customers through December 31, 2020, keeping students and families connected during the pandemic crisis.

“On behalf of our local school districts, I want to express sincere appreciation to the County for prioritizing the needs of children and youth, especially those who lack internet access at home,” shared San Mateo County Superintendent of Schools Nancy Magee. “This pilot offers an exciting opportunity to support academic success for more San Mateo County students. We look forward to working in partnership with the County to increase equitable access to digital connectivity.”

The County also recognizes that data will drive the success of this pilot. Kaizen Technology Partners is currently providing project management and data analysis services to develop data models that enable decisions about which internet access solutions will provide the optimum internet access for students in strategic geographic areas in our county.

"As the lead partner on the Digital Divide Initiative, it has been a rewarding journey for our team to provide the County with cutting-edge tools and a comprehensive set of recommendations for quick and effective decision-making by city leadership that positively impacts local students. As a Vietnamese immigrant who values the power of continuous education, addressing the issue of digital inequity is just the start to closing the economic gap that exists across our country," said Dao Jensen, CEO of Kaizen Technology Partners.

San Mateo County has formed a public private Digital Inclusion coalition, composed of government (County, school district), property owners (Eden Housing, Sand Hill Property Company/Woodland Park Communities), technology service providers (Kaizen Technology Partners, Strategy of Things, SmartWave Technologies and Aruba) and Internet service providers (Comcast, T-Mobile), to deliver on this pilot initiative.

The issue of digital inequity is not new. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, access to the internet has been a County priority for the last five years. To date, San Mateo County has more than 100 free public Wi-Fi facilities at parks, community centers and public spaces, which helps residents to connect to county services, helping local businesses, supporting educational opportunities, and providing connectivity channels to those without. (<https://www.smcgov.org/smc-public-wifiproject>).

Note: News release updated Aug. 13, 2020, to correct a spelling error and to add additional context.

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