

Viewpoints: Hold Comcast accountable for performance

By Barbara O'Connor and Lloyd Levine
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In Sacramento and around California, parents spend hours parked at fast-food restaurants or near the local library so their children can access the Internet to complete homework assignments.

For a state that prides itself on being the center of information technology, this is a travesty in 2014. The reason is lack of affordable home broadband. Or, in locations where a discount plan is available, too few people know about it because of weak corporate marketing and support.

The California Emerging Technology Fund, a nonprofit statewide foundation focused on closing the digital divide by promoting technology-neutral broadband adoption and deployment, is calling on regulators to hold Comcast accountable in reviewing its proposal to acquire Time Warner Cable. If they approve the acquisition, under federal law, regulators must find a public benefit.

In 2010, Comcast launched a \$9.95-a-month broadband plan plus a \$150 computer voucher for families of students eligible to receive free or reduced lunch to secure Federal Communications Commission approval to buy NBC. While this program, known as Internet Essentials, is a laudable affordable offer, according to Comcast, only 35,206 households have been signed up in California, or just 11 percent of more than 313,000 eligible families. In the Sacramento metro area, Comcast



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Broadband adoption goals in California are 80 percent home use by 2015 and 90 percent by 2020 to align with the National Broadband Plan. Comcast has said that if the purchase is approved, it intends to extend Internet Essentials to families living in areas where Time Warner now operates, including Los Angeles, which is a welcome announcement. With the Comcast-TWC corporate consolidation, an estimated 1.2 million California households would be eligible for the program – an opportunity to help many more disadvantaged students and families get connected.

However, that opportunity will become a reality only if regulators hold Comcast accountable for results. And low-income students' families aren't the only poor Americans who can benefit from affordable broadband at home.

Regulators should require Comcast to improve its performance if they approve the deal. A reasonable goal would be for the Internet Essentials program to reach 45 percent of eligible households in two years, expanded to include low-income seniors, people with disabilities and returning veterans. The program should continue until 80 percent adoption is achieved in all low-income neighborhoods in the new combined service territory.

Research shows that the best messengers are trusted community organizations that can talk effectively to eligible residents about the benefits of home high-speed Internet. The lackluster subscriber rates for Internet Essentials reveal that Comcast needs to do a better job of both marketing the program and working with local groups to assist them in signing up more eligible households. In states such as California that are major Comcast-TWC markets and have a strategic plan to close the digital divide, regulators should require Comcast to capitalize an independently managed fund to engage community partners to help them achieve the subscription goals.

Comcast also should be held to its promise to make available for all customers stand-alone broadband service that is reasonably priced, not just the more expensive bundled TV-phone-Internet packages. The broadband speed should be comparable to what's offered in the bundled package.

Goals, of course, are meaningful only if there are accountability measures. The FCC should convene a national advisory committee to monitor progress and guide Comcast on strategies to achieve acceptable performance for Internet Essentials.

Our nation's economic well-being and ability to compete globally are at risk with so many Americans still on the wrong side of the digital divide. Now is the time to hold Comcast accountable for delivering a measurable public benefit. After all, it's the law.

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