

# Boston and Comcast Strike Deal for Cheap Internet Services

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Boston has partnered with Internet provider Comcast Corp. to give low-income residents cheaper rates for Internet services.

The deal, announced by Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, will deliver low-cost broadband Internet access to thousands of low-income Boston residents who graduate from one of the city's three federally funded Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA) programs. The programs are intended to increase digital literacy within the city through various workshops tailored for specific age groups.

The 2,800 graduates will be eligible for broadband service for \$10.95 a month in the first year, and \$15.95 a month for a second year. Comcast's standard price for broadband alone, with no TV or phone services, is \$41.95 a month.

"The cost of Internet was prohibitive," said Susan O'Connor, executive director of the Timothy Smith Network, a nonprofit group that runs one of the SBA programs, Online Learning Readiness. "I think this is going to make a huge difference," she said.

Online Readiness Learning is a 12-week, 240-hour digital work force skills training program for unemployed residents.

The three programs — including Technology Goes Home, geared toward helping students, and Connected Living, for seniors — were created by a \$4.3 million grant last September as part of the federal government's economic stimulus package. About 2,800 people are set to graduate this year from the programs. Officials are hoping the Comcast deal can continue for the 2,400 residents estimated to graduate next year, said a spokeswoman from Menino's office.

At 3 megabits per second, the low-cost Comcast service will be slower than its highest-speed services.

"Compared to what they would otherwise be getting for the same price, it's marvelous; it's a very good deal," O'Connor said. "No matter how good the access is in public computing centers, it's not the same if you have it available to you in your house when you need it, when you want it," she said.

The percentage of residents with broadband access in Boston is already well above the national average. A *Boston Globe* article said market research company Scarborough Research reported that 71 percent of adults in the metropolitan area have broadband service, compared to just 61 percent of all U.S. adults. Only two cities rank higher than Boston: San Diego and Atlanta.

Five years ago, Boston began work on a low-cost, citywide, wireless Internet service. In cooperation with an Internet service provider outside Boston, the city has set up service in two neighborhoods that is available for \$9.95 a month, but Menino has given up on the idea of extending the service to the entire city, mostly because it was too difficult to find financial sponsors, Menino told the *Globe*.

The graduates of all three programs are eligible to buy a netbook computer from the city for \$50. Menino told the *Globe* the city expects to issue 1,300 subsidized netbooks over the two-year life of the program.

"Is it perfect? No. Is it better than anything anybody could have possibly dreamed of six months ago? You better believe it," said O'Connor.

The mayor also announced the launch of the Comcast Digital Connectors program, unrelated to the

discounted broadband, which will provide computer training to about 40 low-income middle school, high school and college students at three Boston community centers. Participants must volunteer to teach other young people the computer skills they learn. In exchange, they receive a netbook computer free of charge. Similar programs are already under way in Atlanta, Denver, Miami, Philadelphia and Springfield, Mass.

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