

ISPs Raise Speeds and Suspend Data Caps in Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic

AT&T, Charter, Comcast, Cox, Verizon, and other internet service providers introduce consumer-friendly policy changes

By Allen St. John
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As more people across the country work from home to help stem the spread of the novel coronavirus, some internet service providers (ISPs) are pledging to raise broadband speeds, suspend data caps, and generally make life easier for all.

More than 60 companies signed on to the Federal Communication Commission's Keep America Connected Pledge, promising changes that will protect Americans on a budget from

service interruptions during the crisis.

"Consumer Reports is encouraged by these timely actions," says Jonathan Schwantes, a senior policy counsel in CR's Washington, D.C., office. "Not only are these moves pro-consumer, they're a no-brainer, and we call on all internet service providers and wireless carriers to suspend data caps, boost internet speeds, and provide free or discounted service for those consumers most in need."

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According to the provisions of the Keep America Connected Pledge, companies have agreed not to terminate service for residential customers and small-

business owners who can't pay their bills due to disruptions from the coronavirus pandemic. They will also waive late fees caused by the crisis and open their WiFi hot spots to anyone who needs them.

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"This is a great first step and a necessary one," says Schwantes.

Jessica Rosenworcel, an FCC

commissioner, has called on companies to offer even more assistance. "We need to expand these pledges and make adjustments to FCC programs so that even more Americans can get online during this crisis at little or no cost," Rosenworcel says. "Where data caps and overage fees are in place, they need to be lifted and eliminated."

AT&T and Comcast say they will

suspend data caps for internet service to eliminate fees for consumers. T-Mobile is removing data caps for cellular customers, too (details below).

Comcast has announced that it will also boost internet service speeds in its lowest-tier plans and offer new residential customers free internet for 60 days. Altice, Charter Spectrum, and Cox Internet also announced programs providing free internet to qualified low-income users for a limited time.

Want to know what the ISPs in your area are doing to help consumers during the COVID-19 crisis? Consumer Reports reached out to ask about their plans.

Aside from Sparklight, all those on the list below have signed on to the FCC's Keep America Connected program. As more info rolls in, we'll update this article.

Consumer Reports shows you how to get a stronger WiFi signal at home.

What's Your Internet Service Provider Doing?

Altice

The company is offering its Altice Advantage 30 Mbps broadband service free for 60 days to any new residential customer currently without internet access. According to the FCC, 25Mbps and above classifies as high-speed.

AT&T

The company says it will suspend data caps for its fixed internet service. It also offers a \$10-a-month Access From AT&T program for qualifying low-income households.

Charter Spectrum

The ISP will offer free Spectrum broadband and WiFi access for 60 days to households with students in kindergarten through 12th grade or college students who don't already have a Spectrum broadband subscription at any service level up to 100 Mbps. The installation fees will be waived for new student households. To enroll, call 844-488-8395.

For eligible low-income households

without school-age children, Charter offers Spectrum Internet Assist, a low-cost broadband program delivering speeds of 30 Mbps. Spectrum doesn't have data caps or hidden fees.

Comcast

Comcast will offer new residential customers who qualify its \$9.95-per-month Internet Essentials program free for 60 days. The company says it will boost its internet service speeds from 15/2 Mbps to 25/3 Mbps, which qualifies the service as high-speed broadband under FCC guidelines. Comcast will also suspend data caps for 60 days and refrain from disconnecting service or charging late fees for customers who contact the company regarding overdue payments.

Cox Internet

Starting Monday, new customers can receive a free month of internet service in the company's Connect2Compete plan, available to qualified low-income households for \$9.95 a month. The company is also fast-tracking the application process to get families connected more quickly.

Cox will make its Complete Care support program free to all residential

customers who have technical issues or need assistance installing features like education software or teleconferencing. The company is going to increase internet speeds from 25/3 Mbps to 50/3 Mbps for 60 days for the Starter, StraightUp Internet, and Connect2Compete packages, and speed up the implementation of a 50Mbps upgrade for users of Cox's Essentials service. That upgrade had been scheduled for later in the year.

Sparklight

The company says it's making unlimited data available on all internet services and waiving late fees for the next 30 days. Customers can call to arrange payment deferrals, Sparklight adds.

T-Mobile

The company has no data cap for its home internet service. All current T-Mobile and Metro by T-Mobile wireless customers who have cell-phone plans with data will be granted unlimited smartphone data for the next 60 days (excluding roaming). They'll also receive an additional 20GB of mobile hot spot/tethering service for those two months. The company is working to provide Lifeline low-income customers

with up to 5GB of free data per month over the next two months.

Verizon

The company recently increased speeds at no extra cost on some mid-tier FIOS services, bumping the 100 Mbps tier to 200 Mbps and the 200 Mbps tier to 300 Mbps. The company reports that it places no data caps on its home internet broadband services. Verizon also offers a low-cost Lifeline plan for qualified families.

Correction: An earlier version of this article referred to Jessica Rosenworcel as the FCC commissioner. She is one of four commissioners who serve alongside the FCC chairman.