



501 3rd Street, NW - 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.467.4900 - F 202.467.4949
childrenslawcenter.org

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Government Operations & Facilities
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Performance Oversight Hearing:
Office of the Chief Technology Officer

Charles (Buck) Logan
Special Counsel
Children's Law Center

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Thank you, Chairperson White and members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify regarding the Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO). My name is Buck Logan and I am an attorney at Children’s Law Center, which fights so every DC child can grow up with a loving family, good health, and a quality education.¹ With almost 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children’s Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year.

My testimony focuses on the “Internet for All” program being administered by OCTO.² Mayor Bowser announced the creation of this program last September.³ It seeks to provide 12-months of free home internet service to 25,000 low-income families. The program is funded by a \$3.3 million grant from the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund established by the 2020 federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

To be eligible for the program, a family must be receiving SNAP or TANF benefits and have a child enrolled in a DCPS school or DC public charter school.⁴ The service is provided by Comcast or RCN, with the DC government paying 100% of the monthly bills for 12 months.⁵ Comcast and RCN have said they will not bar participation in the program due to prior non-payment of bills.

Children’s Law Center strongly supports this program. Almost all District students have been attending school virtually during the pandemic, making access to

reliable internet access at home essential. Internet access also supports telehealth services, which allow school behavioral health services to reach students at home as they struggle with the stress created by the pandemic. The Internet for All program can play a vital role in ensuring distance learning and telehealth services reach all DC children, regardless of income. This is especially important during a public health crisis that has caused dramatic increases in unemployment and financial strain for low-income residents.

Children's Law Center, however, is concerned that the program may be substantially undersubscribed. Only about 4000 families signed up after OCTO's first round of outreach last September.⁶ While OCTO has continued to reach out to families about the program by phone, text, and email,⁷ our understanding is that it remains far short of the goal of providing free internet to 25,000 households.

One obstacle to greater participation is that some families are mistaking OCTO's calls, texts and emails for spam and do not respond. Another obstacle is that families cannot directly contact OCTO to initiate the enrollment process themselves. Rather, they must wait for OCTO to contact them, with OCTO using student contact information provided by the schools. In our experience, these student contact lists are often out-of-date, especially for some of DC's most vulnerable students. For example, a family may have changed mobile phone service and moved in recent months, but the

student's school may not be aware of these changes. For these students, OCTO's outreach will fail.

Children's Law Center recommends that OCTO take several steps to try to overcome these obstacles:

First, OCTO should continue reaching out to eligible families and conduct broader social media and advertising campaigns to spread the word about the program.

Second, OCTO should closely coordinate its outreach with local schools. Schools can in turn get the word out to their parent communities to look out for OCTO calls, texts, and emails. Schools can also ask parents to confirm student contact information is current.

Third, OCTO should modify its enrollment system to allow families to contact OCTO directly about signing up. OCTO can then work with these families and their schools to confirm the family's eligibility before referring them to Comcast or RCN.

Fourth, OCTO should expand program eligibility to all District children placed in foster care as well as to Medicaid recipients with children enrolled in a DC public school.

These steps will help increase participation in the Internet for All program and take us a few steps closer to bridging the digital divide. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify about this important issue.

¹ Judges, pediatricians, and families turn to Children’s Law Center to be the voice for children who are abused or neglected, who aren’t learning in school, or who have health problems that can’t be solved by medicine alone. With nearly 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach one out of every nine children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods--more than 5,000 children and families each year. We multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children. *See* <https://www.childrenslawcenter.org/>.

² In administering the program, OCTO is coordinating with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education and local education agencies.

³ <https://dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-announces-33-million-investment-provide-home-internet-low-income-dc-students#:~:text=Washington%2C%20DC-.Mayor%20Bowser%20Announces%20%243.3%20Million%20Investment%20to%20Provide,to%20Low%20DIncome%20DC%20Students&text=OCTO%20is%20reaching%20out%20to,schools%20to%20the%20internet%20providers.>

⁴ *See* <https://www.techtogetherdc.com/internetforall>.

⁵ For years, DC (through OCTO) has offered subsidized broadband access for low-income residents through a program called “Connect.DC.” For \$10/month, eligible residents receive broadband Internet access from “Comcast Internet Essentials” or “RCN Internet First.” To be eligible, the resident must be participating in a public assistance program (SNAP, SSI, Medicaid, housing assistance, school lunch program) or in the Lifeline program. <https://connect.dc.gov/affordable-internet>. The Internet for All program is a similar program, except that it pays 100% of the cost for 12 months.

⁶ *See* <https://givingcompass.org/article/this-free-internet-initiative-is-proving-faulty-for-students/>.

⁷ For recent OCTO outreach efforts, *see* <https://twitter.com/DigitalEquityDC/status/1354777847731253248>.