



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 22, 2021

CONTACT:

Mayor's Press Office

312.744.3334

press@cityofchicago.org

MAYOR LIGHTFOOT ANNOUNCES PROGRAMMATIC EXPANSION OF 'CHICAGO CONNECTED,' THE CITY'S GROUNDBREAKING INITIATIVE TO CLOSE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE, AS KIDS FIRST CHICAGO RELEASES IMPACT DATA ON THE PROGRAM'S FIRST ANNIVERSARY

With nearly 64,000 students served across 42,000 households, 'Chicago Connected,' the most extensive broadband accessibility program in the United States, has made significant progress in closing the city's digital divide during its first year

CHICAGO – Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot today announced a series of key developments to the 'Chicago Connected' initiative on the anniversary of the first-of-its-kind program, including an extension of internet service for graduating CPS seniors attending City Colleges of Chicago in the fall, the launch of a digital literacy training platform, and a one-year impact review issued by Kids First Chicago. These announcements build on Mayor Lightfoot's launch of 'Chicago Connected,' a groundbreaking initiative to provide free high-speed internet access to 100,000 Chicago students and their households for four years, on June 25, 2020.

"The pandemic has reinforced the notion once and for all that internet access isn't a luxury but a necessity," said Mayor Lightfoot. "'Chicago Connected' is a groundbreaking program that has and will continue to help close the digital divide, which further restricts access to high-quality education, healthcare, social services, jobs, and more. I am thrilled to continue this work by expanding 'Chicago Connected' to our community college students and help to open more doors of opportunity up for our residents."

In April 2020, Kids First Chicago, an education advocacy group and core 'Chicago Connected' partner, collaborated with the Metropolitan Planning Council to release a report titled '[Digital Equity in the Coronavirus Era](#).' The report highlighted the stark reality of the digital divide, indicating that 1 in 5 children in Chicago lacked access to reliable in-home internet, with even larger gaps in predominately Black and Latinx neighborhoods on the city's South and West sides. 'Chicago Connected' was launched to address this critical need.



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



“In today’s world, connectivity is everything. In providing connectivity to tens of thousands of families across the city, ‘Chicago Connected’ has provided opportunity to those who need it the most,” said 12th Ward Alderman George Cardenas, Chairman of the Committee on Environmental Protection and Energy. “Nowhere has this impact been felt more than in our communities of color. Mayor Lightfoot pledged an inclusivity- and equity-focused agenda from the start of her administration, and she’s lived up to that promise at every turn. I am proud of the broadband program she’s created and fully support these exciting, ambitious developments.”

In the months since ‘Chicago Connected’ launched, internet accessibility dramatically increased in the city and helped contribute to a permanent public support system for families. To date, approximately 64,000 students across 42,000 households have been served by the program, cutting the city’s digital divide by nearly two-thirds.

“The statistics for ‘Chicago Connected’ are powerful, but these are more than just numbers. Each datapoint represents a real student or a real family. As someone who has spent a large portion of his career advocating for children and families in Chicago, I understand the profound impact broadband access can have,” said 24th Ward Alderman Michael Scott, Chairman of the Committee on Education and Child Development. “‘Chicago Connected’ has made life better for thousands of Chicagoans, and I thank Mayor Lightfoot for her continued commitment to this worthy cause.”

‘Chicago Connected’ reflects the pioneering leadership and collaboration among the City, Chicago Public Schools, Kids First Chicago, Citadel Founder and CEO Ken Griffin, and the broader philanthropic community in creating a scalable solution to address the digital equity gap. In addition to Citadel, the philanthropic community behind ‘Chicago Connected’ included Crown Family Philanthropies, the Chicago Community Covid-19 Response Fund, ITW, Pritzker Traubert Foundation, the JPB Foundation, the Chicago Community Trust, the Joyce Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and President Barack Obama and Mrs. Michelle Obama. A combination of support from the City, CPS, and philanthropic organizations is funding the \$50 million program.

Ken Griffin, convener and top funder of ‘Chicago Connected,’ said, “Over the past year, we have taken great strides in empowering Chicago’s students to pursue their dreams and realize their fullest potential. ‘Chicago Connected’ has shown communities across the United States that when we bridge the digital divide, we offer young people a critical pathway to success.”



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



From inception, ‘Chicago Connected’ represented a national milestone for progress in broadband expansion. In March of 2021, *Education Week* hailed the program as “the gold standard for district-ISP agreements.” Many other leading voices across the country have recognized ‘Chicago Connected’ as a national exemplar, including the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) and the *Wall Street Journal*.

“From the original launch of ‘Chicago Connected’ to the development of a digital literacy coalition, this project has involved and learned from trusted community-based organizations. The decisions that led to the announcements today were made with input from Chicago digital inclusion practitioners,” said Angela Siefer, Executive Director at NDIA. “We at NDIA often point others to ‘Chicago Connected’ as a model to be replicated. The city-wide digital literacy platform, support and coalition are, again, replicable models.”

The ‘Chicago Connected’ model paved the way for dozens of local governments across the United States and Canada, who were committed to solving their respective digital divides.

Extended Service for 2021 Graduating Seniors Attending City Colleges of Chicago

In order to ensure as many Chicago students and households continue to have access to broadband as possible, Mayor Lightfoot announced today a further expansion of ‘Chicago Connected.’

Internet service for graduating seniors will be continued beyond the last day of school through October 31, 2021. Additionally, 2021 CPS graduating seniors in Chicago Connected attending City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) this fall will be extended free internet service for up to three years or upon completion of a CCC degree, whichever happens first.

This extension will ensure service continues for hundreds of high-need students. This change marks the first step toward expanding ‘Chicago Connected’ to public university students, an expansion the City will continue to prioritize over the coming months.

“There is no better time than now and no better place than community college to prepare for careers in a post-pandemic economy,” said City Colleges of Chicago Chancellor Juan Salgado. “City Colleges is committed to eliminating barriers, such as a lack of technology access, that prevent Chicagoans from starting and finishing college.”



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



City Colleges of Chicago is enrolling students for its fall semester, with in-person and online classes and services, at ccc.edu/apply or 773-COLLEGE.

Free Access to Digital Learning Resources

When Mayor Lightfoot announced ‘Chicago Connected’ in June 2020, she pledged progress toward a broader digital equity strategy, including a commitment to digital inclusion, literacy, and learning. Today, Mayor Lightfoot fulfilled that promise with the launch of the ‘Chicago Connected’ digital learning platform in a joint partnership with the Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition (CCLC) and Northstar Digital Literacy.

Enrollment in ‘Chicago Connected’ will now include free access to online portals with classroom curricula, training materials, and thousands of assessments, all available in self-guided and in-person formats, to build and test computer skills. In addition to these partnerships, a compilation of digital learning resources will be made available on the ‘Chicago Connected’ website, entirely free of charge. These resources can be found at cps.edu/digitalllearning.

“True inclusion requires providing equitable tools, resources, and pathways to all Chicagoans. Chicago Connected does just that by providing the opportunity for our fellow citizens to have access to the tools, skills and know-how to thrive in the 21st century,” said Penny Pritzker, Trustee of Pritzker Traubert Foundation and former U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

Year One Impact Report Issued by Kids First Chicago

Kids First Chicago today released ‘Chicago Connected 2021 Program Impact Report,’ a one-year review of ‘Chicago Connected.’ The report details the results of a survey of more than 30,000 newly connected households. The survey found that 80% of families enrolled in the program identify as Black or Latinx and 75% indicated annual household incomes of less than \$35,000.

The report also reveals the many ways families utilize ‘Chicago Connected’ to better their lives. 82% of families use their internet access for remote learning content and 71% for communication over email and searches for information online. Beyond this, 44% indicated using internet access to earn a new degree, while 37% leverage the service to apply for new jobs.

The report highlights that students who are enrolled in ‘Chicago Connected’ had an average attendance rate of 91.2%, which is higher than the overall school district average. The link to the full impact report can be found below.



CITY OF CHICAGO • OFFICE OF THE MAYOR



- [Chicago Connected 2021 Program Impact Report](#)

“This initiative emerged from our conversations with Chicago families struggling to access critical services in a time of great need,” said Daniel Anello, CEO of Kids First Chicago. “Guided by data and firsthand accounts of those most impacted, we brought our findings to the City and other key stakeholders and immediately found willing partners to permanently bridge Chicago’s digital divide. We will continue working to ensure that community and parent voice shapes the growth of this program.”

Community Based Organization Partnership Expanded

Finally, Mayor Lightfoot announced the reopening of applications for community-based organizations (CBOs) interested in joining the ‘Chicago Connected’ coalition. Over the course of the last year, 35 CBOs throughout the city have been instrumental in supporting ‘Chicago Connected.’ The program’s success is largely attributable to the community outreach and neighborhood-level issue resolution provided by CBO partners. Beginning July 1, 2021, applications will reopen for CBOs interested in joining the network. Applications will be made available at the link below.

- [CBO Applications \(Available July 1, 2021\)](#)

For more information, please visit cps.edu/chicagoconnected.

To access the Year One Impact Report, please visit kidsfirstchicago.org/chicago-connected-year-review.

###