



ACORN Canada

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7th December 2020

Members of the Committee on Industry, Science & Technology

We at ACORN Canada, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, take this opportunity to express the concern over the issue of accessing reliable and affordable internet, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through this written submission, ACORN members would like to share the issues our members are facing in accessing affordable and high-speed internet. We would urgently like to talk to you to discuss this issue. We look up to you to spearhead some urgent actions to ensure that the most vulnerable are able to access the internet, especially during a pandemic.

Social or physical distancing called by all governments during the present crisis is critical, but that comes at a cost and that cost is accessibility to high-speed internet. Canada has the most-expensive monthly prices for internet access in the developed world and the "Big 3" telecoms together control more than 90% of the country's wireless market.

ACORN Canada is an independent national organization of low-and-moderate income families with 140,000+ members in 20+ neighbourhood chapters across 9 cities.

A survey by ACORN Canada in 2019 throws some very important findings:

- Low-income respondents with household incomes of \$30,000 or lower were less likely to have home internet access than those with incomes over \$60,000. Only 76% of respondents with household incomes below \$10,000 had home internet access.
- Cost was found to be the biggest barrier to access the internet. Almost 50% people paid over \$70 /month for internet services. This number was the same for respondents with household incomes below \$30,000. Cost was found to be so prohibitive that people had to forgo internet services at home.
- Many low-income Canadians found themselves in the difficult position of deciding whether to pay for home internet (and the opportunities it provides) or pay for basic necessities such as food, clothing or transit. A quarter told us they have sacrificed food in order to pay for internet services and almost one third have made multiple sacrifices.

ACORN has been fighting to ensure that everyone has access to the internet for years and won the Federal Connecting Families Program which has been helpful for families receiving the maximum child benefit; however, it is still extremely limited in its reach.

- By reaching out to only those families with children that receive the maximum child benefit, it not only leaves out many families with children but also low-income seniors and other vulnerable people without affordable internet. There is also a cap of 220,000 families.



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- As the program relies on voluntary participation of internet service providers, there are still many like Eastlink that have refused to participate and provide affordable internet access to people.
- The internet speed is too low for people with multiple children and multiple needs in relation to the internet, especially in times of social distancing.
- **Most importantly, the uptake of the program is dismal at 5% of some low-income parents. It comes down to 2% when we add in all 3.4 million who may need the program.**

As the pandemic rages, internet prices continue to soar. Recently, major telcos like Bell & Rogers were able to put the court's decision to slash the wholesale internet rates on hold. All the while they refuse to create programs for low-income people, as ACORN has been calling for as part of its internet for all campaign.

We are demanding that the federal government acts swiftly and bridges this digital divide by:

- √ Offering all "low-income Canadians" and "fixed-income seniors" **\$10/month** Internet with 50/10 speed through the "Connecting Families" program; and
- √ For all customers: Unlimited data at no extra cost; No overage charge" for data use; No price increases; No disconnection for non-payment, arrears or any reason.

In light of the ongoing pandemic, there are urgent changes needed to ensure that the most vulnerable people are able to access the internet.

We sincerely hope that you will listen to the voices of hundreds and thousands of low-income Canadians who continue to live under extremely desperate situation during this unprecedented crisis and are looking up to you to take some urgent actions.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Marva Burnett
President
ACORN Canada

For more details, please contact Judy Duncan at canadaacorn@acorncanada.org or 416-996-6401

Just because the internet is there, doesn't mean I can access it

*CORY DANIELS,
OTTAWA ACORN*

When we received the letter telling us that we were entitled to the internet support program for low income families at \$10 internet per month, we found it interesting. A bell technician came and told us our internet bill will cost 71 dollars

*LINA
DEBEGE,
MONTREAL
ACORN*

INTERNET FOR ALL - NOW & BEYOND COVID-19!

If you ask me if I would choose the internet over Cable TV, I would say, YES

*CLAUDETTE,
HAMILTON
ACORN*

I chose not to opt for the Connecting Families Program. The speed is too low

*NATALIE
COLE
PEEL
ACORN*



ACORN spoke to its members coast to coast to understand their issues in accessing the internet.

The need is greater than ever!

Not that I need a phone or internet, but I don't have a choice

*TATIANA BOSS,
BC ACORN*

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT US
AT: CANADAACORN@ACORNCANADA.ORG**

ACORN MEMBER TESTIMONIES

INTERNET FOR ALL

ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) Canada is an independent national organization of low- and moderate-income families. We have over 130,000 members organized into twenty four neighbourhood chapters in nine cities across Canada. We believe that social and economic justice can best be achieved with a national active membership who are invested in their organization and focused on building power for change!

ACORN members have played a central role in fighting for affordable and reliable internet for all in the country. After years of struggle, we won the Federal Government's Connecting Families Program, but the program falls short on many counts.

At a time when governments - Federal and Provincial - have called for people to stay home during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for an affordable and reliable internet is greater than ever!

ACORN Canada spoke to its members from coast to coast who are struggling to access the internet. This document is a collection of their testimonies.

What do we want?

- FREE Internet for all low-income Canadians and fixed-income seniors during the “pandemic and recovery period” and for 6 months thereafter.

- Immediately expand the Federal Government's Connecting Families Program:
 - a. It should cover ALL people below the low income measure and not just be limited to those with children
 - b. The cost should not be more than 10 dollars with a minimum speed of 25mbps.
 - c. Should be made mandatory for ALL telecom providers
 - d. Needs to include subsidized computers or tablets

Corey Daniels, Ottawa ACORN

“Just because the internet is there, doesn’t mean I can access it”.

I am an Ottawa ACORN member for more than 5 years now. I have three sons, two of them stay with me and the eldest one is on his own now. My only source of income is the Ontario Disability Support Program, most of which goes into covering my monthly rent of 1094 dollars. In this situation, I cannot afford the internet. My son who has a learning disability and is in Grade 9 is unable to get any online learning since the pandemic started in Canada and led to school closures. It was after a lot of effort that he completed his semester, but now because he has missed so many classes, he might have to repeat his second semester. I never reached out to his school because even if we get a laptop, what will I use it for? They are not giving free internet. The government needs to understand that just because winter boots are available, it doesn't mean that I can afford to buy them from the Bay. In the same vein, just because the internet is there, doesn't mean I can access it. It's such a false assumption!

This pandemic has turned the world upside down and the government has not responded accordingly. There is one disadvantage over another --- the government keeps saying apply online, apply online, without lowering the price of the internet! I need the internet for so many things, even if I ever want to eat food from outside. Am I not entitled to buy a pizza once a month? I cannot even do that because the menus are online and you can order food only online.

Doug Ford is prioritising opening a golf course! Can I survive eating a golf ball? It's about priorities, it's about what governments care about most. This is high time that the government should put all its attention to ensure that the internet is affordable for all people.

Tatiana Boss, BC ACORN

“Not that I need a phone or internet, but I don’t have a choice”.

I have a son who is 21 years old and is currently enrolled in an online course. Because there are no jobs right now, he decided to continue education. Also, I need my son around for some time for support. I receive a disability allowance from the government and my son gets a bursary - which is how we run our household. But we never have enough for groceries. We have no money left after a month. Thankfully, I live in subsidised housing.

We were part of the pilot affordable internet program that was started by the federal government and were very happy with that. The internet bill was never above 11 dollars or so in a month. But in January this year, that program stopped. We are no longer entitled to the new Connecting Families Program. I am not sure how youth need less internet than children? Why does the program not cover youth? Don't they have to access the internet for studies and other things? If we need children to continue education, how can we expect that without the internet?

We had no information from the government that we were no longer part of the pilot affordable internet program. All of a sudden, we got a bill of 96 dollars from TELUS in January this year. I was shocked and immediately called the company to tell them that there was no way that I can pay this amount. They lowered the amount to 50 dollars. Now both my son and I pay half of the total internet bill.

I reached out to the Terry Beach Office of my MP to check if there was any affordable internet program, but they couldn't help as there is no such program.

My phone internet plan is with FIDO which is 25 dollars per month. Now they are asking us to switch to a higher plan with more data but I can't afford it. The company used to have a system of replacing a phone after every two years with no extra price. But now they have stopped this program. th my son and I have a bad phone, it can stop working anytime. Our computer is also very old. Sometimes when I try to be on a zoom call these days, video stops working, sometimes even sound stops coming. I can't even socially be in touch with people. My son, who has a disability, lost his lectures, because the sound on the computer went off!

Soon the computer will also die! And then there is no end - you need a printer, you need proper equipment if you want to study at home. ANd I can't have my son go to the college to study all the time because I need his help.

Do I need a phone? No; Do I need a computer? No; but do I have no choice. Internet is a lifeline. I cannot even take my appointments or do anything without it.

I recently had to go to a grocery store but they won't accept cash. People like us have limited accounts with banks. I have been charged a service charge of more than 20 dollars because I can use the card only for 6 times without a charge. This is highly discriminatory!

Claudette Gadoury, Hamilton ACORN

“If you ask me if I would choose the internet over Cable TV, I would say, YES”

I was working as a Chef until I got to know that I had a disability. My work required standing for prolonged hours, but then people started telling me that I appeared angry because of my pain. I later found out that I had a chronic illness. Since then I have been on disability, its been three years now.

I can barely make ends meet. I get an ODSP payment of around 1255 dollars per month out of which 900 dollars goes in paying rent. The little that's left is paid for food, cell phone bill and several other necessities. Mostly, I have to juggle with which payments can be possibly met in a month. But I always prefer paying for food and paying late fees for other expenses.

I have a cable TV which charges me 32 dollars per month. But if you ask me if I would choose the internet over Cable TV, I would say, YES because I can get access to much more information using the internet. But I just can't afford it. Because I have a laptop and a Computer, people assume I have the internet as well.

I also have a cell phone for which I pay a hefty amount of 67 dollars per month. I am so glad that my contract with FIDO is coming to an end this July. I had purchased a cell phone from them because of which I had to take a package and enter into a contract for 2 years. Now that's coming to an end. So I can switch to another service provider to access and hopefully get cheaper internet.

For me affordable internet means 1 dollar a day with no overage charges. I am neither asking for any privileges nor am I asking for any free service. Why can't these multi million dollar companies give us affordable internet? Even if they charge 40 dollars for a month, I will pay for it because I need some entertainment.

I am not good with electronics. Once, I forgot to switch off my data and the company charged me a humongous amount. I called them and they treated this as an exception. There was no way I could have paid that much amount. I also remember using the internet for an extra hour and the company asked me to pay an extra service charge plus fees! It's ridiculous. Now I have to keep reminding myself to use it very carefully.

My friends tell me to go to the public library to access the internet. But why should I? Why should I not be able to afford it at home? And now there is no choice because everything is closed.

There are some affordable internet programs for families but nothing for single people like us.

Natalie Cole, Peel ACORN

“I chose not to opt for the Connecting Families Program, the speed is too low”

I am a long term care worker, but had to stop working as soon as COVID-19 hit Canada since I had to take care of my two children. I am paying 1500 dollars for a two bedroom apartment and have also applied for subsidised housing which has a long waitlist. I don't know when will I get it.

Before I moved in this house, I contacted another owner for a 2 bedroom house because I wanted to stay in the same neighbourhood with school and daycare but despite having sufficient funds in my account and furnishing all documents, I was told that I don't have enough income!

I got a letter from the federal government about the connecting families program which was 10 dollar a month. I was so happy but then when I saw the speed of the internet - I was like, how do I and both of the children can ever access the internet with that slow speed! And then you also TV with the internet.

Why can't the government use 3 persons per household as a base to compute the speed of the internet? I never took the program. But then Rogers was so expensive that my monthly bill was more than 100 dollars. Finally, I switched to CIK and now I pay 46 dollars. That's still high but atleast all of us can access the internet.

Both my children are now taking online classes. It would have been impossible without the internet.

Lorraine Pryce, Ottawa ACORN

“There are days when my health is just not good, that's when I need the internet on my lap...not an elevator or steps away””

I was working as a Nanny, looking after a baby. But due to COVID-19, my part time job went as I was laid off. I don't see myself going back to work any time soon as my work requires physical proximity which isn't good at this point. So I am left with my ODSP payment to meet all my expenses.

Because I was unable to make 5000 dollars last year or 12 months prior to applying for CERB, I was unable to get the benefit. Plus I have heard from so many people that those who are on ODSP and are also getting CERB are in a difficult spot.

Last year, I was living out of three food banks which made me feel so sick. The food that's given is so pathetic, it's all leftovers, something that's not meant for people. I became so undernourished that I nearly passed out.

My health requires additional supplements for which I pay 400 dollars every month and then all other costs such as rent of 700 dollars, cell phone bill of 50 dollars add up! How can I afford the internet? I have a cellphone plan which allows me unlimited calling for which I pay 50 dollars every month. Because I couldn't pay my bills regularly, I had an outstanding amount of 200 dollars. I called up the Virgin mobile company to request for a waiver but they didn't allow that. So I had to ask a friend to help with 75 dollars. I had to live on merely 155 dollars last month!

These companies don't care. They are criminals. In our building, we have a computer on the top floor, so I can use youtube or zoom or anything but there's no camera. But, there are days when my health is just isn't good, that's when I need the internet on my lap...not an elevator or steps away. If there is an urgent email, I just can't look at that email on that day.

One day I heard an arrogant person on radio saying that why can't people just lock themselves in their public library and access the internet. They will make all these judgments without any understanding of how we survive on disability. People are making very difficult choices. My rent went up from 680 to 700 dollars. It's the people who will become homeless, not the Ontario government. I have applied for social housing, have been on the waitlist since eternity!

I have allergies to carpet, also to smoke inhalation. There are things that I need to be careful about.

The company (Usana) from where I buy my supplements says their mission is to help and work with people. It's such a farce!

Ursula Siegler, BC ACORN

“The price is too high”

I live alone, so for me the only source of entertainment is the internet. Every time I want to book a channel, they charge you too much, that's ridiculous. I am paying 150 dollars per month to access the internet on my phone and TV.

I have been associated with BC ACORN for quite a few years now. I am retired, my source of income is the pension I get. I am not tech savvy but I love playing solitaire, looking stuff up on the internet - mainly for entertainment. It has been especially isolating during the pandemic. It is so important to have the internet when you are alone.

I feel the price to access this essential service is too high! We need to get the price down. It takes too much time to connect with SHAW to talk about any issue.

Ray Noyes, Ottawa ACORN

*“More than half of income is on rent.
The rest is milk...can't afford internet
or a cell-phone”*

I am 64 years old and have been on disability assistance. I went to the Saint Paul University and also studied 2 years at Carlton University. I worked part time at St. Paul University Library and 10 years at Statistics Canada.

I do not have access to the internet as I can't afford it. I pay 623 dollars for rent and then 50 dollars for 7 meals to the Meals and Wheels so that I can get atleast 7 cooked meals in a week. During the pandemic, it has been more clear than ever that all of us need the internet. The only source for me to get information on what's happening around me and the world is through the radio. That's my only source of entertainment. Governments and private experts keep saying that it's important for people not to be isolated and get depressed during the pandemic. But how do you do that with no access to the internet?

Even to access government support, you need the internet. I used to be very handy with the internet until 2001. I had email accounts, used to edit website etc. But then, because of my health issue, I had to stop working. I have an old laptop. Sometimes, I used to go to Tim Hortons or the Public Library. The Library near my home is nice, it has been recently renovated and has private cubicles. But now, my computer is very old. As it is, everything is closed now.

I don't even have a cellphone, can't afford it.

My doctor is making appointments online and on the phone. I told the doctor about the article I wrote about issues in accessing the internet. She got so excited about it that she said she will talk to the director of the community health centre and try to ensure that subsidised internet is made available for people like me. That would be great!

I recently got to know that the government of Ontario has provided a 100 dollar top-up to people who are on ODSP. But I didn't know it was available since March. I only got it in May and hopefully will get it for June and July as well. But I'm no sure if I will be given March and April payments. If I had access to the internet, I might have been more informed.

Alejandro, Toronto ACORN

"I am thankful to the TCHC's (Internet for Success) program, otherwise I would have been unable to access the internet"

All my expenses have multiplied during the pandemic. By the end of the month, like many people, who survive on the Ontario Disability Support Program, I am left with almost nothing.

Living during the pandemic requires buying so many things to protect yourself - gloves, masks, disinfectants, sanitisers etc. And all this on top of our regular expenses which are already too high. Transit costs have gone up, 160 dollars for a monthly pass is too high. Given my health issues, I have to buy more expensive food. I am also lactose intolerant, so have to be selective what I can eat. My doctor has prescribed me to take cannabis which costs 100 dollars. So, how can anyone afford internet with all these expenses?

Thankfully, the Toronto Community Housing has the Internet for Success program with Rogers. We got this program because we, as Toronto ACORN, put pressure on the city. I pay 12 dollars for the internet, which is affordable.

During the pandemic, I have been taking online appointments with my doctor. Without the internet, it would have been so difficult to talk to my doctor. Especially for people like us who are not native English speakers, I need to see the doctor, even if that happens virtually, since I am able to explain myself. Video conference makes it so much easier.

This year, I even filed my taxes online. I just provided all my information and it was quick. It was an incredible experience! I order my groceries online and just take the delivery at a specific place.

Before I moved to TCHC, I didn't have internet. I could never afford it.

Everything has changed now. Everyone needs internet. The government must treat this as an essential service. I am thankful to the TCHC program, otherwise I would have been unable to access the internet.

Lina Debege, Montreal ACORN

"The connecting families federal program never helped us as it was supposed to."

I've Joined Montreal ACORN this year. I have three kids in secondary school who need internet at home to do their homework during and after COVID-19. I am a mom studying and my husband can't find a job now because of the pandemic. The "connecting families" federal program never helped us as it was supposed to.

When we received the letter telling us that we were entitled to the internet support program for low income families at \$10 internet per month, we found it interesting. A bell technician came and told us our internet bill will cost 71 dollars as the 10 dollar program wouldn't cover our devices. So, we agreed with Bell to freeze our bill to 40 dollars, which was far from the original 10 dollars that the program is supposed to provide. But the next bills increased up to 50 and 100 dollars without any change in our consumption.

When we complained, Bell started to lower the bills without any valid explanation. We decided to cancel our contract with Bell.

When the government announces to give affordable internet for low income families at 10 dollars per month, they need to stick to it and respect their advertisement. They need to follow up with the providers and take measures so that the program is respected and vulnerable people don't end up in paying more. Every time the government gives something to the community, there should be a committee to ensure programs are applied and respected.