Mills Administration Awards $5.6 Million to Build High Speed Internet Infrastructure for Students in Underserved Maine Communities

November 20, 2020

More than 730 students in rural Maine will have access to highspeed broadband to support remote learning by the end of the year through the Governor's ConnectKidsNow! Initiative

Governor Janet Mills announced today that her Administration has awarded $5.6 million in CARES Act Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) monies to fund the construction of permanent internet infrastructure that will bring high-speed broadband to more than 730 students across rural Maine.

The awards are the result of a new Mills Administration initiative called ConnectKidsNow! that brought together State government, school superintendents, and several of Maine's Internet Service Providers in a public-private partnership to improve internet access and to build it out to new rural locations.

> *"Internet access is no longer a luxury, it is a necessity, and no child in Maine should be left out of the classroom because they can't get online," said Governor Mills. "This public-private partnership will make a significant difference by bringing broadband to more kids in more rural communities so they can stay connected to their teachers and to one another. Still, there is more work to do. As long as any Maine child struggles to learn because of a lack of internet access, I will continue to push for expanded broadband across the state of Maine."*
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> *"This has been a phenomenal public and private partnership, and I am proud of the hard and collaborative work done by our administration and service providers to ensure more than 700 Maine students have the same virtual learning opportunities as their classmates," said Pender Makin, Commissioner of the Maine Department of Education. "We are grateful for Governor Mills' leadership, commitment and vision for a state where broadband access is prioritized and recognized as a vital and much needed resource."*
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> *"Students' ability to connect to distance learning is a key factor in school success," said Heather Johnson, Commissioner of the Department of Economic and Community Development. "This is a significant step forward in students' access to reliable internet access which is key to their future success."*

ConnectKidsNow! is a new initiative by the Mills Administration to further connect Maine students to high speed internet access amidst the pandemic. In response to the pandemic over the past several months, many school districts across Maine have developed and implemented a hybrid-learning model that divides students into cohorts, with one cohort attending school and the other cohorts engaged in remote learning from home. Some models also allow for schools to teach fully remotely, if deemed appropriate.

However, the ability of a child to learn remotely depends almost entirely on access to high speed internet – a challenge for a state like Maine that lacks adequate internet, if it has internet at all, in some rural locations. Recognizing this challenge, the Mills Administration – through the Department of Economic and Community Development, the Department of Education, and ConnectMaine – worked closely to identify where kids were not sufficiently connected, or at all connected, to the internet due to lack of infrastructure.

The Administration and Superintendents then partnered with Internet Service Providers who, in turn, evaluated where they would be able to build the necessary infrastructure to connect students to high speed internet before the end of this year, the deadline for using the CARES Act Funds established by the U.S. Treasury Department.

As a result, the Mills Administration awarded a total of $5.6 million in CRF monies to the following seven Internet Services Providers to bring high-quality broadband to Maine students and rural communities:

- Axiom was awarded $1.5 million to bring fiber connections to students on four roads in Whiting and East Machias.

  "Axiom is pleased to be working closely with the state to connect kids to 21st Century fiber optic cabling," said Mark Ouellette, Axiom President and CEO. "We appreciate the leadership of Governor Mills, Commissioner Johnson of DECD and Peggy Schaffer of ConnectMaine who have worked tirelessly to create the ConnectKidsNow! project. Because of their efforts we expect to connect unserved homes in rural parts of East Machias and Whiting and give kids a real chance to work from home."

- Charter was awarded $68,898 to extend service to students on roads in Canaan.
- Comcast was awarded $77,000 to extend service to students living on unserved roads in Bath, Berwick, Kittery and Woolwich.
- First Light was awarded $63,000 to extend service to students in Buckfield, Sumner, and Bethel.
- · LCI was awarded $2,165,000 to extend fiber service to Hope, Lincolnville and Appleton and a section of Bristol.

  "We are so proud to work as partners with the School Districts and Municipal officials in Hope, Appleton and Lincolnville. By collaborating with our community partners we were able to successfully extend high-speed fiber optic broadband to over 300 student and teacher households in those three towns," said Shirley Manning, Owner and President of Tidewater Telecom and Lincolnville Networks. "We know that this expansion of broadband will positively impact many, many rural families in our regions for decades to come. Our ultimate goal is to provide 100 percent Fiber to the Home to all of communities we serve. With the leadership of the ConnectMaine Authority and Governor Mills, we are now making a quantum leap forward toward that goal."

- Pioneer was awarded $52,000 and is expanding their fiber service in Houlton and Oxbow.

  "Pioneer Broadband is pleased to participate in ConnectMaine's ConnectKidsNow! Northern Maine has many homes with remote learners that have parked their cars near the town library in order to get a WIFI connection," said Timothy R. McAfee, CEO of Pioneer Broadband. "We look forward to connecting them at their homes!"

- Redzone Wireless was awarded $1,739,700 to upgrade existing service and install new service to reach locations in 55 Maine towns.

"Maine's reliance on Broadband infrastructure for essential daily household activities, particularly remote education, has reached a critical level during the pandemic," said Jim McKenna, CEO of Redzone Wireless. "We commend ConnectMaine and the Maine Department of Education for developing this program to address Maine's most urgent broadband needs quickly. Redzone Wireless is grateful for the opportunity to support this effort with both new and upgraded broadband infrastructure. The investments associated with this program will provide free broadband connections to hundreds of Maine families by January, and affordable broadband access to over 45,000 Maine homes in 55 communities."

The ConnectKidsNow! Initiative builds on the Mills Administration's previous work to secure mobile hotspots and learning devices for nearly 24,000 students across Maine after schools suspended in-classroom instruction and adopted remote learning earlier this year. It also reinforces the Governor's goal to expand broadband across the state. Last year, the Governor introduced and helped pass a $15 million bond, ultimately overwhelmingly approved by Maine voters, to expand broadband.

The Mills Administration's use of federal funding awarded to the state can be viewed on the Bureau of the Budget website.

Credit

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