

Ways for learners to access data and computers at low and no cost

Overnight, the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted people's daily routines and support networks. Fundamental services and supports are now online. The shift has amplified an entrenched digital divide built on existing social and economic inequalities. People are scrambling to apply for emergency benefits, find different ways to access food banks, stay informed and seek medical and mental health supports. Families with children are also burdened with the need to transition their children to online schooling.

Staff and volunteers in Ontario's Literacy and Basic Skills programs find themselves on the front-lines, doing all they can to support learners with the most basic needs—food, housing, public health information and access to the internet. To provide some assistance, we have put together known sources of free and low cost data and computers. We recognize this is yet another short-term and limited solution, added to a long-list of stop-gap measures. What we really need are long-term and comprehensive solutions that address the fundamental social and economic inequalities that limit opportunities and burden the daily lives of learners. Maybe the crisis is a chance to look for opportunities and create connections to allow this to happen.

Immediate solution for all LBS learners

It appears that the wording in the LBS guidelines about **the use of training supports** has some flexibility (our emphasis). Check out the [new LBS Guidelines](#). Refer to page 55.

“Training supports could cover various needs such as, but not limited to: child care, transportation and accommodation(s) for persons with disabilities.”

Other possibilities

If learners receive the maximum child tax benefit through CRA, [Connecting Families](#) is available to families that have received a letter from the federal government notifying them of their eligibility.

If learners receive social assistance, they can contact their case workers who are able to access [additional funding related to the COVID-19 outbreak](#). “This funding can be used to meet a broad range of needs, for example: cleaning supplies, transportation, food or clothing that individuals and families may require due to COVID-19.” Up to \$100 is available to single individuals and up to \$200 for families.

If learners are in foster care or have recently transitioned out of care they may be able to receive a free smartphone from [Telus's Mobility for Good](#) program.

If learners need computers, the [Computers for Success](#) Program, as part of the federal government's Connecting Family initiative, offers free or low-cost computers to non-profit organizations. In Ontario, the program is run through [RCT Renewed Computer Technology](#).

Depending on where you live

If learners live in [specific community housing](#) in Ontario [Rogers Connected for Success](#) offers access to home internet for \$9.99/month (Up to 100GB monthly with no over usage fees; free installation and modem (Wi-Fi enabled) rental; and no credit check required)

If learners live in community housing in Ottawa, the [National Capital Freenet](#) offers a [community access fund](#) for home internet service for \$25/month (Unlimited use; 6Mbps download speed; free installation; no credit checks). Although a credit card is required at [sign-up](#), customers could switch to pre-authorized debit for payment afterwards. Email communityaccess@ncf.ca.

If learners are in the city of Toronto, the [city](#) is partnering with telecommunications companies to offer free internet access at 25 residential buildings for a year starting in early May. The city is also working with [Telus](#) to give away free smartphones equipped with data plans.

If learners live near shopping malls and other retail locations in urban areas (even though they're closed right now), they may be able to access [Shaw Go WiFi](#) and [Telus Wi-Fi](#) hotspots for free. However, since both of these providers are primarily based in Western Canada, there are not too many WiFi spots available in Ontario.

Also to consider

If you are helping learners purchase data, check out a comprehensive and up to date [review of prepaid and pay-as-you-go cell plans](#) from WhistleOut. They recommend the 7-Eleven SpeakOut \$50 Voucher with bonus value. They also have a handy guide to help you figure out [how much data](#) may be needed for various online activities.

Do you know of others? Please add to the list.