**Assistance Needed for Pilot Program to Keep School Students Connected**

With the start of the 2020-2021 school year, local partners are working to ensure that the lack of an internet connection will not keep students from learning.

Many K-12 students lack computers and internet service, marking a critical need that must be addressed as many local schools use remote learning or hybrid models.

The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) recently began working with the Educational Service Center of Central Ohio (ESCCO) and PCs for People, a national nonprofit focused on digital inclusion, to outline a strategy to address student broadband access on a community-wide scale.

This Central Ohio Broadband Access Pilot Program is a public-private program that is addressing immediate digital device and access needs of low-income K-12 students in Central Ohio for the 2020-2021 school year by delivering 10,000 refurbished PCs and 10,000 hotspot devices with 12 months of unlimited broadband access.

This collaborative project is being made possible through the generosity of private funders and public funders, in addition to federal CARES Act funding. It is a way to address the real needs, right now, in partnership with school districts across Central Ohio, while long-term work continues to help communities plan for digital infrastructure and inclusion in the future.

Businesses and organizations can participate by providing financial support or by donating used computers that can be refurbished for program participants.

The project partners are working directly with internet service providers to procure hotspot devices and internet service at discounted monthly rates that will meet the needs of local school districts and the families within them.

PCs for People is also offering a package for families that includes a computer, monitor, accessories, and basic software package for $80. Funding through the pilot program will subsidize 75% of the cost ($60) of the computers for income-qualified households, with the recipient paying the remaining $20.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Franklin County struggled with disparities in access to digital technology. In 2018, according to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, of the 366,034 households in the City of Columbus:

* 97,112 households (26.53%) did not have access to fiber-optic broadband (e.g., cable)
* 46,500 households (12.7%) had no access to broadband of any type (e.g., cellular data, “hotspot” device)

More information about supporting the Central Ohio Broadband Access Pilot Program is available at [www.morpc.org/broadband](http://www.morpc.org/broadband). Questions can be directed to MORPC Data & Mapping Director Aaron Schill at aschill@morpc.org or 614.233.4154.