



WAKE COUNTY
Smart Start

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NEWS RELEASE

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Wake County Smart Start, Community Partners, Distribute Tablets and Connect Families to Early Childhood Support and Education Programs

Community Partners: Verizon, RBC Foundation, Wake County Human Services, WakeMed, and Dorcas Ministries

Editor's Note: Please follow these links to Best Baby Zone distribution event [photos](#), [video](#), an [interview](#) with Wake County Commissioner, Maria Cervania, and WCSS Executive Director, Gayle Headen, and an [interview](#) with Verizon staff. Click here for photos from the device delivery to Dorcas Ministries and WakeMed.

Reaching families who face digital access obstacles and connecting them to transformative programs is foundational to the work of Wake County Smart Start (WCSS). Families without devices or internet connections face significant challenges obtaining community resources that provide life-changing support. The pandemic only deepened this digital divide. Now, a special WCSS initiative is putting service-activated devices into the hands of families most removed from digital access, showing how this critical link is necessary and beneficial.

"Families isolated by COVID-19 have faced extraordinary challenges from the pandemic, and they have carried much of it alone, unable to access Wake's system of services for help. This has increased the risks for children. What we know is that when families have access to resources and programs they need, children thrive," said Wake County Smart Start Executive Director, Gayle E. Headen.

"It's been our distinct privilege to partner with Wake County Smart Start to remove digital access barriers and bring reliable connectivity to this community. Helping to bridge the digital divide is central to our Citizen Verizon mission, where we believe connectivity and technology should be available to all. Providing families access to early childhood support and education programs in Wake County is our latest example of this commitment," stated Mark Tina, VP Sales for the Eastern Region for Verizon Business.

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To help address this system gap, WCSS invested \$310,250 in a connectivity initiative, including \$69,000 in Verizon service and equipment in-kind credits, and a donation of \$4,000 from the RBC Foundation, yielding 225 tablets and 25 Hot Spots, preloaded with two years of wireless service. The devices also feature a special setup with support for users new to tablets and web navigation.

WCSS identified multiple distribution partners to ensure the devices are placed with those most in need. Caseworkers at these partner organizations will identify families that have limited or no connectivity and would benefit from supportive programs and resources. Participating partners share more below about their roles, and the benefits of the investment:

Wake County Human Services will provide linkage to families living within the *Best Baby Zone* in SE Raleigh. This initiative works to reduce infant mortality that disproportionately affects African American mothers when compared to other races in 27610 and 27601 ZIP codes. "We live in a digital age where internet is a necessity, not a luxury, and having reliable technology and devices are vital," said Wake County Commissioner Maria Cervania. "By focusing on our Best Baby Zone residents, we can ensure all families are well connected with every available community resource and support enabling them to thrive and reach their full potential."

Dorcas Ministries will identify families that come through their food pantry and family support services. "The great thing about learning, is that once you have learned no one can take it away from you," said Dorcas Ministries Executive Director, Howard Manning. "The disparities in the availability of technology between the haves and the have nots was amplified by the pandemic. This is one step of many that are needed to provide equal learning opportunities to everyone. Thank you, Wake County Smart Start, for reaching out to Dorcas and other agencies to make things happen."

WakeMed Children's Pediatric Primary Care will identify patients with digital access obstacles. "Although digital access is a key tool to connect with our patients, we also realize that access can be a real challenge for families. Consistent internet connectivity and devices mean more resources, support and better care for kids and families – from connecting with medical providers and real-time mental health services to parenting support through our LAUNCH project. We are hopeful that this Digital Access Project will benefit the health and well-being of children and families across Wake County," said Dr. Carrie Dow-Smith of WakeMed Children's.

RBC Foundation stepped in with funding to assist with project deployment, supporting the Best Baby Zone event specifically. Harrison Peatross, from RBC Wealth Management, representing RBC Foundation shared, "RBC is honored to participate in such a worthy

cause. The whole program gives such an impact to not only the families but to the community. Wake County Smart Start builds a foundation that will last forever and is a building block for the future. We continue to be proud to reside in this community and stay committed to support it for the betterment of the whole.”

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Wake County Smart Start works to ensure children, birth to five, are prepared for success in school and in life. This mission is carried out in four goal areas: children are in safe, supportive home environments, are in high-quality care that contributes to positive child outcomes, are healthy and ready for school, and that children and their families are supported by a strong, diverse, integrated early childhood system. Through community collaborations and funding of local partners, we expand the support available to children and their families. To learn more about our mission, visit www.wakesmartstart.org.

Verizon Communications Inc. (NYSE, Nasdaq: VZ) was formed on June 30, 2000 and is one of the world’s leading providers of technology and communications services. Headquartered in New York City and with a presence around the world, Verizon generated revenues of \$128.3 billion in 2020. The company offers data, video and voice services and solutions on its award-winning networks and platforms, delivering on customers’ demand for mobility, reliable network connectivity, security and control.