



BROADBAND ACCESS Fact Sheet

Lifeline Program Provides Discounted Access to Needed Telephone and Broadband Internet Services, But is Underutilized

As more people must utilize government services in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals are newly eligible for discounts on broadband and phone services through the federal Lifeline program. However, [as of April 28, 2020 only 7 million of 38 million](#) eligible individuals had enrolled in the program. Closing this digital divide is essential to promoting [public health](#), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the need for internet and phone access has increased due to social distancing measures and school closures. Individuals need more access to participate in telehealth programs, distance learning, and job searching. As the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has said:

Today, broadband is essential to participate in society. Disconnected consumers, which are disproportionately low-income consumers, are at an increasing disadvantage as institutions and schools, and even government agencies, require Internet access for full participation in key facets of society.

...

[S]tudent access to the Internet has become a necessity, not a luxury.¹


Recognizing that many households that are newly eligible for federal services due to the COVID-19 pandemic may be unaware that the Lifeline program exists, the [FCC Commissioner has sought to coordinate with other federal agencies](#) to provide enrollment information to newly eligible households.

State, local, and tribal public health programs may also wish to inform their constituents about their ability to access broadband and phone services through the Lifeline program.

The FCC's Lifeline Program

The federal Lifeline program provides discounts on broadband and phone services to income qualifying customers. In 2020 the program budget, which is adjusted annually for inflation, is [\\$2.385 billion](#), and in 2018 [9.6 million households, about 25% of](#) the estimated 8.6 million eligible households, received this benefit.²

The Lifeline program reimburses telecommunications providers for the \$9.25 monthly discount provided to low-income subscribers, with an additional \$25 monthly discount to rural residents of tribal lands.³ An authorized official of a federally recognized American Indian Tribe or Alaska Native Village may seek approval for tribal Lifeline services on off-reservation



lands by demonstrating the tribal character of the area or community.⁴ The Lifeline discount for standalone telephone service, not bundled with qualifying broadband service, will decrease by \$2/year (starting December 1, 2019) and be completely phased out by December 1, 2021.⁵

Eligible Households

Eligible households have income less than 135% of poverty guidelines, or participate in federal assistance programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, Federal Public Housing Assistance, Veterans and Survivors Pension Benefit, Bureau of Indian Affairs general assistance, Tribally administered Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Head Start, or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.⁶ Eligible households may only utilize the Lifeline discount on one service, and must choose to use their discount on either telephone or broadband service, or a bundled service that includes both broadband and phone service.⁷

Before receiving the Lifeline reimbursement, telecommunications providers must verify each subscribing household's eligibility.⁸ This can be done by consulting the National Lifeline Eligibility Verifier (a database used to facilitate the determination of consumer eligibility for the Lifeline program) or the state Lifeline administrator or other responsible state agency.⁹ If eligibility cannot be determined using these resources, the telecommunications provider must confirm a subscriber's eligibility using an income or program database or by reviewing subscriber provided documentation of program-based eligibility or income documentation of at least 3 months.¹⁰ A subscriber's eligibility must be confirmed annually.¹¹

Lifeline household subscribers may be de-enrolled for a number of reasons, including non-usage, failure to re-certify eligibility, or for utilizing the discount on more than one service per household.¹²

Service Details

Participating telecommunication companies must provide a minimum level of service to Lifeline subscribers. Mobile voice services must include at least 1000 minutes per month while broadband service minimums for speed and usage are updated annually.¹³ Currently, telecommunications providers must provide Lifeline customers with the following broadband service minimums:

- mobile broadband service: 3G (third generation) mobile broadband service, with a minimum allowance of 3 GB of mobile data; and
- fixed broadband service: 20 megabits per second downstream and 3 megabits per second upstream, with a minimum allowance of 1024 GB of broadband data.

These minimum service levels will be updated in future years according to the mechanism provided in regulations.¹⁴

Recent Orders Responding to COVID-19

To make the program most accessible to a broader array of customers during the COVID pandemic, the FCC recently waived some requirements of the program. [Individuals no longer must provide 3 months of income verification](#) to gain eligibility for the program, making it easier for the recently unemployed to utilize the service. Until June 30, 2020 individuals can confirm their income eligibility for the program using documentation such as a notice of unemployment benefits. In addition, the recertification and re-verification requirements of the Lifeline program are waived until June 30, 2020 and no subscribers may be involuntarily de-enrolled before that date.

SUPPORTERS



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This document was developed by Betsy Lawton, Senior Attorney at the Network for Public Health Law – Northern Region Office. The Network for Public Health Law provides information and technical assistance on issues related to public health. The legal information and assistance provided in this document does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, please consult specific legal counsel.

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¹ In the Matter of Lifeline & Link Up Reform & Modernization, 30 F.C.C. Rcd. 7818 (2015), ¶¶ 13, 18.

² 47 C.F.R. § 54.423.

³ 47 C.F.R. §§ 54.403(a), 54.407.

⁴ 47 C.F.R. § 54.412.

⁵ 47 C.F.R. § 54.403(a)(2).

⁶ 47 C.F.R. §§ 54.400(j), 54.409(a)-(b).

⁷ 47 C.F.R. § 54.402(b).

⁸ 47 C.F.R. § 54.410(b)(i)(B).

⁹ 47 C.F.R. § 54.410(b).

¹⁰ 47 C.F.R. § 54.410(b)-(c).

¹¹ 47 C.F.R. § 54.410(f).

¹² 47 C.F.R. § 54.405(e).

¹³ 47 C.F.R. § 54.408.

¹⁴ 47 C.F.R. § 54.408(c).