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The End of the Affordable Connectivity Program: Options for Consumers and Congress

The Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC’s) [Affordable Connectivity Program \(ACP\)](#) was established in 2021 by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (P.L. 117-58) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program, which was funded with a one-time appropriation of \$14.2 billion, provided a subsidy to households with income at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines for monthly internet access: \$30 per household or \$75 per household on tribal lands. The ACP also provided a one-time subsidy of up to \$100 toward the purchase of a connected device (e.g., mobile phone, laptop). Efforts to provide additional ACP funding in the 118th Congress were unsuccessful (S.Amdt. 2024 to H.R. 3935, H.R. 6929, and S. 3565). The ACP ended on June 1, 2024.

At one time, over 23 million households received ACP support. No single alternative exists that would fully replace ACP. Some consumers may qualify for assistance to pay for internet access through other existing programs, including the Lifeline Program, various Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) programs, and discounted plans from internet providers. Consumers may be eligible for more than one of these programs (e.g., a veteran might be eligible to participate in Lifeline and VA programs, plus subscribe to a discounted service from an internet provider).

FCC Lifeline Program

The FCC’s Lifeline Program [subsidizes the cost of home broadband and phone service for low-income consumers](#). While the goals of the ACP overlapped with those of the Lifeline Program, Lifeline is funded through the Universal Service Fund (USF), not appropriations. The USF is supported by contributions from telecommunications carriers, and such costs are commonly passed on to consumers. USF funds cannot be transferred and used for non-USF programs. The 2025 funding year budget for the Lifeline Program is \$2.9 billion.

Lifeline Support for Low-Income Consumers

Households that earn 135% or less than the federal poverty guidelines may qualify for the Lifeline Program. The Lifeline subsidy is \$9.25 per month for home internet or mobile phone plans—well below the subsidy that was offered by the ACP. Additionally, participants in the following [federal programs](#) qualify for Lifeline: Medicaid Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Federal Public Housing Assistance, and certain tribal programs. Further, [residents of federally recognized tribal lands](#) are eligible for an additional \$25 subsidy ([Table 1](#)).

Lifeline Support Through a Child or Dependent

An adult can qualify for a Lifeline subsidy if she or he has a child or dependent eligible for the program and the

household income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines ([Table 2](#)).

Table 1. Lifeline Eligibility
Maximum Annual Household Income, 2025

Household Size	Contiguous States, DC, and Territories		
	AK	HI	
1	\$21,128	\$26,393	\$24,287
2	\$28,553	\$35,681	\$32,832
3	\$35,978	\$44,969	\$41,378
4	\$43,403	\$54,257	\$49,923
5	\$50,828	\$63,545	\$58,469
6	\$58,253	\$72,833	\$67,041
7	\$65,678	\$82,121	\$75,560
8	\$73,103	\$91,409	\$84,105
<i>Each Add'l</i>	\$7,425	\$9,288	\$8,546

Source: Universal Service Administrative Company, “Do I Qualify?,” <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/do-i-qualify>.

Note: These limits are 135% or less than the federal poverty guidelines.

Table 2. Lifeline Eligibility
Child/Dependent or Safe Connection Act,
Maximum Annual Household Income, 2025

Household Size	Contiguous States, DC, and Territories		
	AK	HI	
1	\$31,300	\$39,100	\$35,980
2	\$42,300	\$52,860	\$48,640
3	\$53,300	\$66,620	\$61,300
4	\$64,300	\$80,380	\$73,960
5	\$75,300	\$94,140	\$86,620
6	\$86,300	\$107,900	\$99,280
7	\$97,300	\$121,660	\$111,940
8	\$108,300	\$135,420	\$124,600
<i>Each Add'l</i>	\$11,000	\$13,760	\$12,660

Source: Universal Service Administrative Company, “Safe Connections Act,” April 2025, <https://www.usac.org/wp-content/uploads/lifeline/documents/pdf/2025-Federal-Poverty-Guidelines-for-Survivors-Applying-to-Lifeline.pdf>.

Note: These limits are 200% or less than the federal poverty guidelines.

Lifeline Support for Survivors of Domestic Violence, Human Trafficking, and Related Crimes

The Safe Connections Act of 2022 (SCA; P.L. 117-223) helps survivors of domestic violence, human trafficking,

and related crimes get discounted phone, internet, or bundled services. If a survivor is part of a family plan, the survivor may pursue a line separation request; the SCA requires mobile providers to separate phone lines linked to family plans where the abuser is on the account.

Survivors experiencing financial hardship can participate in Lifeline by providing proof of a line separation and meeting the following eligibility requirements: household income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines (**Table 2**); enrollment in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; enrollment in the Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch or Breakfast Program, including enrollment at a Community Eligibility Provision school or school district; or having received a Federal Pell Grant in the current award year. The privacy of survivors using this benefit is protected, and they can receive up to six months of emergency Lifeline support.

Resources

[Lifeline Program: Do I Qualify?](#)
[Apply for Lifeline](#)

Programs for Veterans

Veterans may be eligible for specific VA-administered programs. According to November 2024 data collected by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), [about 14.5% of veteran households do not have a way to connect to the internet at home](#). The VA Telehealth Services has developed the Digital Divide Consult and the Connected Device Program to help qualifying veterans receive VA-loaned equipment to access telehealth services and benefits. Exact expenditures for these VA programs are not available, but a [2022 VA Office of Inspector General report](#) estimates the cost to be about \$6 million to \$8 million annually.

Veterans may be eligible to receive Lifeline benefits if they meet the requirements for that program (See “[FCC Lifeline Program](#),” above).

Resources

[Telehealth VA: Bridging the Digital Divide](#)
[Connecting Veterans to Telehealth Care](#)

Internet Service Provider Programs for Low-Income Consumers

Although not required to do so, some internet service providers (ISPs) offer reduced rates for some low-income consumers. The [FCC’s broadband map](#) allows consumers to find local ISPs. **Table 3** lists some of these programs.

Selected Additional Resources

In addition to federal and ISP programs, some nonprofit organizations provide additional resources. For example,

- [Computers4People](#) and [PCs for People](#) provide refurbished computers to some low-income users.
- EveryoneOn helps consumers [find low-cost internet plans and computers](#), enroll in [digital skills courses](#), and find local events that distribute devices.
- Human-I-T [sells refurbished devices at a discount](#) and [offers low-cost internet](#) using mobile hotspots to military veterans, low-income households, seniors, and other qualifying groups.

Table 3. Selected ISP Programs for Low-Income Consumers

Program	Monthly Price	Max Download Speed, Mbps
Access from AT&T	\$30	100
Astound Internet First	\$20	150
Cox Connect2Compete	\$10	100
Cox ConnectAssist	\$30	100
Mediacom XTREAM	\$10	100
Optimum Advantage	\$15/\$25	50/100
Spectrum Internet Assist	\$25	50
Verizon Forward	\$20-\$81	50-2,000
WOW! Internet Select 50	\$10	50
Xfinity Internet Essentials	\$10	50

Source: Compiled by CRS from company sources.

Note: Mbps = Megabits per second.

Congressional Options

Congress may determine that existing broadband subsidy programs are sufficient or should be reduced. If Congress determines that additional funds are warranted, it could make changes to existing programs, restart the ACP, or consider the future impact the [Broadband Equity Access and Deployment \(BEAD\) Program](#) may have on affordable broadband.

Existing Programs

If Congress determines that the original goals of the ACP have not been satisfied or should continue, Congress could, through oversight or legislation, encourage or require existing programs, such as Lifeline, to provide more generous benefits (i.e., subsidies that are as high as or similar to the ACP amounts).

Restart the ACP

If Congress were to appropriate additional funds to restart the ACP, it could consider changing the program’s enrollment requirements (e.g., decrease the income eligibility, limit the time participants may remain in the program, disallow the use of funds to purchase a connected device) so it could be funded at a lower level or allow the funds to last longer. Congress also could direct the FCC to increase Lifeline support to low-income consumers (e.g., increase the subsidy, allow purchase of connected devices).

BEAD Program

The BEAD Program, which is managed by NTIA, requires states to prioritize broadband proposals that would provide affordable access to low-income consumers. Infrastructure built using BEAD funds, therefore, could complement Lifeline subsidies, but BEAD is not intended to replace Lifeline. At this time, however, few states have had their final proposals approved by NTIA, and, for those already approved, the funding has not been released. There is no timeline for when BEAD services may become available.

For additional reading, see CRS Report R47621, *The Future of the Universal Service Fund and Related Broadband Programs*, by Patricia Moloney Figliola.

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