

THE DISCOUNT INTERNET GUIDEBOOK



Authors:

National Digital Inclusion Alliance

Bill Callahan
Angela Siefer

Public Knowledge

Alisa Valentin
Daiquiri Ryan
Benjamin Austin



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Working Group

Bobby Coulter, Fresno Housing Authority
Norma Fernandez, EveryoneOn
Alyssa Kenney, DANEnet
Vicky Yuki, City of Seattle
Marian Christmon, Nashville Public Library
Ed Blayney, City of Louisville

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INTRODUCTION

This Guidebook describes affordable broadband plans for disadvantaged American households offered by commercial internet providers (or in two cases, nonprofit resellers of a commercial service). Some offer very inexpensive plans for families with school children enrolled in the Federal school lunch subsidy program. Others offer similar cheap connectivity to low-income veterans, seniors living on Supplemental Security Income, public housing residents, households enrolled in Federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance, or clients of nonprofit organizations including digital inclusion programs. They include cable modem, DSL and fixed wireless service, at a variety of rates from \$5 to \$15 a month and a range of download speeds from 768 Kbps to 30 Mbps.

Of course these deep-discount Internet opportunities are limited to eligible consumers who live in specific geographies -- i.e., the service areas of the companies that offer them.

None of these broadband discount plans existed eight years ago. Most date to actions by the Federal Communications Commission during the Obama Administration. Some are required by temporary agreements made in merger cases, and may end when the underlying agreements run out. Others are voluntary and open-ended.

Taken together, these plans should create an

opportunity for many millions of low-income Americans, in communities across the country, to get reasonably fast access to the Internet at a very affordable cost. In most communities they represent the only such opportunity.

But eligible households, and the communities where they live, must be aware of the opportunity and how to take advantage of it.

The number of households actually subscribed to these plans is not publicly available. Only one provider reports its program's annual enrollment numbers. Most refuse to make this information public, treating it as a trade secret. Providers who are required to report their participation totals to the FCC have successfully petitioned to have it redacted in public versions of those reports.

NDIA and Public Knowledge are certain the enrollment totals fall far short of the millions of households that could be benefiting.

To take one important example: Discount broadband is now being offered by all four of the nation's biggest cable providers -- Comcast, Charter, Cox and Altice -- to families in their service areas whose children receive free or reduced-cost school lunches. The service territories of these four companies include about 120 million of the nation's 126 million homes.

22 million children participated in the federal free-

or-reduced lunch program in 2017;¹ the program doesn't report the number of families those children represent, but it must be at least ten or twelve million households. Comcast Internet Essentials, the oldest and biggest of the four cable discount programs -- and the only one to report its results -- has connected between 1 and 1.5 million of them. It's very unlikely that Charter, Cox and Altice together account for even a fifth of Comcast's total.

So that leaves at least 8 to 9 million eligible low-income families, almost all in those providers' service areas, who could be receiving discount cable modem service but are not.

The underutilization of available deep-discount broadband programs is a major concern for digital inclusion practitioners and advocates, and should be for policymakers in general. Home broadband cost has long been recognized as one of the key barriers to digital inclusion, and that's even more true in 2018, with commercial ISPs in most markets now charging \$60, \$70 or more per month for the most modest home connections.²

Reliable information about these programs -- who's eligible and where, what they cost, what they provide, how to apply, and the practical experiences of getting people enrolled -- is a vital resource for digital inclusion programs and

strategies. In many cases, NDIA affiliates and others around the country have found this vital information difficult to come by, and even more difficult to verify.

That's why NDIA and Public Knowledge have collaborated to create this Guidebook.

This guidebook has a twofold purpose. It is a practical guide for digital inclusion practitioners -- local community-based organizations, libraries, housing authorities, government agencies and others working directly with community members in need of affordable home broadband service. This guidebook also contains recommendations for policy makers and internet service providers to improve current offers and establish new offers.

METHODOLOGY

The information in this guidebook was gathered through survey results as well as in-depth interviews from digital inclusion practitioners. A survey was completed by several dozen practitioners representing NDIA Affiliates. These digital inclusion organizations and programs represent a variety of geographic locations, digital inclusion services and stages of operation from infancy to maturity, and the working group was comprised of six NDIA Affiliates. Interviews were conducted with the Working Group Members. Finally,

¹ United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. (No Date). Overview Retrieved from: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/overview>

² National Digital Inclusion Alliance. (July 31, 2018). Tier Flattening: AT&T and Verizon Home Customers Pay a High Price for Slow Internet. Retrieved from: <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/NDIA-Tier-Flattening-July-2018.pdf>.

the data gathered was analyzed for common themes. The working group reviewed a draft of the guidebook and provided additional information to increase the richness of the data.

HISTORY

Cost as a barrier to Internet access for low income Americans has been an issue for policy makers, Internet providers and digital inclusion advocates since the World Wide Web's popular emergence in the mid-1990s.

The rapid transition of the retail Internet service sector – from a diverse, highly competitive collection of dial-up providers in the 1990s to a tiny handful of very large cable and telecom broadband providers, enjoying monopolies or duopolies in most markets, by the mid-2000s – had a major effect on the price of basic home access. As mainstream bandwidth requirements grew, DSL and cable Internet bills grew with them.

In 2000, when home DSL and cable modem connections were just appearing in many communities, the cost of the standard 56 kbps dial-up connection was less than \$20 a month. Consumers with limited budgets could often find a local ISP or an ad-supported service like NetZero for \$10 or less.

But by 2010, dial-up was no longer a serious option. The plethora of home providers at the

end of the '90s had shrunk to just one or two, and their monthly charge for a modest “standard” home broadband connection, i.e. 3 to 6 Mbps ADSL or cable modem service, was generally between \$35 and \$50 after the usual year of promotional pricing. Time Warner Cable's Road Runner “Standard” service that year, for example, was 7 Mbps downstream for \$49.99 a month.

As the impact of rising costs on Internet access for low income households became more apparent, there were a couple of early attempts to deal with it through philanthropic partnerships as well as regulatory deals. In 2006 AT&T and One Economy launched “Access All,” which included 50,000 free Internet connections for low-income families served by Habitat for Humanity and similar organizations.³ The next year AT&T began to offer a low-end DSL product for \$10 a month to new customers,⁴ as one sweetener for the FCC's approval of its merger with Bell South. (Whether AT&T delivered on this agreement is a matter for debate.)

But serious efforts to create low-cost broadband options for low-income Americans didn't really begin until the Obama Administration, and the 2009 appointments of Julius Genachowski and Mignon Clyburn to the Federal Communications Commission.

³ Philanthropy News Digest. (June 16, 2006). AT&T Announces %100 Million Internet Access, Technology Initiative. Retrieved from: <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/at-t-announces-100-million-internet-access-technology-initiative>

⁴ San Jose Mercury News via Associated Press. (June 18, 2007). AT&T quietly introduces \$10 DSL plan, part of BellSouth merger concessions, Retrieved from: <https://www.mercurynews.com/2007/06/18/att-quietly-introduces-10-dsl-plan-part-of-bellsouth-merger-concessions/>

The ISP discount programs outlined in this guidebook arose from two initiatives led by FCC Chairman Genachowski and his successor, Thomas Wheeler. Clyburn, who served with both, also played a major role. Those initiatives were:

1. The merger deals – a succession of low income discount rate programs that were included as conditions of FCC approval of major cable and telecom mergers between 2011 and 2016; and
2. Connect2Compete – a program that Genachowski organized with the cable industry following the first big merger-deal program, Comcast Internet Essentials, which extended some elements of that program to other cable providers on a voluntary basis.

ARRA, BTOP and the National Broadband Plan

As background to the FCC’s leadership in this area, it’s important to remember that much of President Obama’s first term was devoted to the massive economic stimulus program called the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). One piece of the ARRA was the Commerce Department’s Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP),⁵ which included a \$400 million investment in community comput-

er access centers⁶ and home Internet adoption support⁷ programs for disadvantaged, disconnected Americans – by far the biggest funding commitment in support of digital inclusion ever seen.

The ARRA also gave the FCC a task: The creation of a National Broadband Plan⁸ with “a detailed strategy for achieving affordability and maximizing use of broadband to advance consumer welfare, civic participation, public safety and homeland security, community development, health care delivery, energy independence and efficiency, education, employee training, private sector investment, entrepreneurial activity, job creation and economic growth, and other national purposes.” The FCC completed and published its Plan in March 2010. It included several pages on barriers to household Internet adoption and ways to overcome them.

So Obama’s new FCC appointees weren’t acting in a political vacuum when they considered how to make broadband more affordable for low-income consumers.

First merger agreements: Comcast and CenturyLink

In December 2009, Comcast, the biggest U.S. cable provider, announced a deal to buy a con-

5 National Telecommunications and Information Administration. (n.d.). Broadband Technology Opportunities Program. Retrieved from: <https://www.ntia.doc.gov/category/broadband-technology-opportunities-program>

6 National Telecommunications and Information Administration. (n.d.). BroadbandUSA Connecting America’s Communities: Grants Awarded- Public Computer Center Projects. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ntia.doc.gov/computercenters>

7 National Telecommunications and Information Administration. (n.d.). BroadbandUSA Connecting America’s Communities: Grants Awarded- Sustainable Broadband Adoption. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ntia.doc.gov/sustainableadoption>

8 Federal Communications Commission. (March 17, 2010). National Broadband Plan. Retrieved from: <https://www.fcc.gov/general/national-broadband-plan>

trolling interest in NBC Universal for \$6.5 billion; and in April 2010, CenturyTel unveiled a \$12 billion deal to merge with Qwest, creating the nation's third biggest telecom corporation. Both deals required FCC approval.

Each of the two mergers took a year to review, and in the end, both were approved with extensive conditions^{9 10}. Among those conditions were Chairman Genachowski's signature low income discount program agreements: Comcast Internet Essentials (\$10 cable Internet for "new adopter" families with children in the Federal school lunch program) and CenturyLink Internet Basics (\$10-\$15 ADSL for new adopter Lifeline households).

Both the agreements were temporary (Comcast's was for three years, CenturyLink's for five) and limited to new users. Both offered minimal speeds (1 or 1.5 Mbps).

In a very brief statement¹¹ accompanying the Comcast merger approval order, Chairman Genachowski gave just twelve words to the adoption discount program: "Our approval is also structured to spur broadband adoption among underserved communities." Commissioner Clyburn had more to say:¹²

The adoption commitment in the Order is groundbreaking and will hopefully serve to chip away at the barriers that keep low-income and minority citizens from accessing the Internet. Having spoken to many students and parents during my time as a Commissioner, I have come to the conclusion that basic word processing skills, computer literacy, and general Internet know-how are all best realized and attained via early broadband adoption. Children with access to competent hardware and up-to-date software are far less likely to fall into the steep and perilous crevasse we know as the digital divide, a lonely place in which too many lower-income and minority children are currently stuck.

With that in mind, I urged Comcast and NBCU to break new ground, to really and truly reach out and touch America's children through an adoption program that is bold, proactive, and realistic with regard to affordability. I sought and obtained assurances that the companies would not embark on a child-directed program just for the sake of doing so, and not to simply check the adoption box in launching a weakly-targeted and poorly-constructed

9 Federal Communications Commission. (January 18, 2011). FCC Grants Approval of Comcast-NBCU Transaction. Retrieved from: <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-304134A1.pdf>

10 Federal Communications Commission. (March 18, 2011). FCC Conditionally Approves Centurylink/Qwest Merger. Retrieved from: <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-305278A1.pdf>

11 Federal Communications Commission. (January 18, 2011). Statement of Chairman Julius Genachowski. Re: Applications of Comcast Corporation, General Electric Company and NBC Universal, Inc., For Consent to Assign Licenses and Transfer Control of Licenses, MB Docket 10-56, FCC 11-4 Retrieved from: <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-304134A2.pdf>

12 Federal Communications Commission. (January 18, 2011). Statement of Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn. Re: Applications of Comcast Corporation, General Electric Company and NBC Universal, Inc., For Consent to Assign Licenses and Transfer Control of Licenses, MB Docket 10-56, FCC 11-4 Retrieved from: <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-304134A5.pdf>

outreach effort that is doomed to produce poor results even before it begins.

The adoption initiative that is detailed in the Order is well-crafted, ambitious, and has enormous potential. By offering the possibility of affordable, high-speed broadband to families included in the Department of Education's School Lunch Program, not only will school-age children be able to explore the infinite worlds of the web, but the others in their homes will be able to join them. Many of these individuals think of a home computer with Internet access as an unattainable luxury, and the broadband adoption program will bring these students and their families as close to household Internet access as they have ever been.

With this statement, Clyburn staked out her role as the Commission's leading voice for low-income digital inclusion -- a role she would continue to play throughout her tenure, both in future merger proceedings and in the 2015-16 push to add broadband Internet access to the Lifeline program.

Connect2Compete

But the next step was taken by Chairman Genachowski. At events in October and November 2011, the FCC Chairman announced¹³ a new

collaboration with the National Cable Television Association and a wide range of other companies and organizations. Called Connect to Compete (C2C), it would be built around a voluntary commitment by other cable providers to create programs similar to Comcast's Internet Essentials: Offering families eligible for the National School Lunch Program a \$9.95/ month broadband Internet service, \$150 laptop or desktop refurbished computers, and free digital literacy training. The effort was initially anchored by One Economy, which soon created a new nonprofit to run it (first called Connect2Compete, then EveryoneOn). Participating cable companies included Time Warner, Cox, Cablevision, Bright House, SuddenLink, and others.

The creation of Connect2Compete locked in the Internet Essentials model as a voluntary cable industry standard. Unlike Comcast, Time Warner, Cox and the other C2C participants didn't agree to report their numbers to the FCC or to meet specific marketing benchmarks. But through 2012 and 2013, to varying extents depending on the company, C2C discount programs did get established, advertised and used by low-income families throughout the country.¹⁴

A second round of merger cases: Comcast (2), AT&T, Charter and Altice

Following Obama's re-election, in early 2013 Chairman Genachowski announced his resigna-

¹³ Eggerton, John. (November 9, 2011). Cable Commits to Sweeping Broadband Adoption Program. Retrieved from: <https://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/cable-commits-Sweeping-broadband-adoption-program-59512>

¹⁴ Acohido, Byron. (March 29, 2013). Cheap broadband offered to 100 million underprivileged. Retrieved from: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2013/03/28/connect-2compete-digital-divide-underprivileged-cheap-internet-access/2029565/>

tion to return to private practice. His successor, former cable executive Thomas Wheeler, was confirmed by the Senate and took office in November.

Three months later, in February 2014, Comcast announced it had a deal to acquire Time Warner Cable.

Three months after that, in May, AT&T announced an agreement to acquire DirecTV.

Over the next two and a half years, the FCC and its staff:

- considered and ultimately helped block¹⁵ Comcast's proposal to a) acquire Time Warner Cable, and then b) trade about three million customers to and from Charter Communications, and spin another 2.5 million off to a new company partially owned by Charter;
- considered and agreed to Charter's subsequent bid to acquire Time Warner for itself, along with Bright House Networks¹⁶;
- considered and agreed to AT&T's acquisition of DirecTV¹⁷; and
- considered and agreed to Nether-

lands-based Altice's acquisition, in rapid succession, of SuddenLink and CableVision, making Altice USA the country's fourth biggest cable provider¹⁸.

These decisions resulted in five of the nation's largest cable providers consolidating into just two, while the biggest telecom corporation acquired the biggest satellite TV provider -- all in less than three years.

Here are the low income discount Internet plans that emerged from all this dealmaking:

- Comcast, whose original Internet Essentials obligation ended in 2014, made a commitment to extend the program indefinitely.¹⁹ That commitment wasn't rescinded when its merger proposal was blocked. It has been enhanced since then.^{20 21}
- Charter proposed and agreed to its own plan as part of the Time Warner-Bright House acquisition, with a \$15 rate for 30 Mbps service for school lunch families and some very low-income seniors²².
- After meeting with Commissioner Clyburn in the late stages of its DirecTV merg-

15 Robertson, Adi. (April 24, 2015). Comcast announces Time Warner Cable dead. Retrieved from: <https://www.theverge.com/2015/4/24/8488997/comcast-time-warner-cable-merger-dead>

16 Kang, Celcia & Steel, Emily. (April 25, 2016). Regulators Approve Charter Communications Deal for Time Warner Cable. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/26/technology/charter-time-warner-cable-bright-house-cable-deal.html>

17 Kastrenakes, Jacob. FCC Approves AT&T-DirecTV merger. Retrieved from: <https://www.theverge.com/2015/7/24/8876267/att-directv-merger-approved>

18 Shepardson, David. (May 3, 2016). FCC Approves Altice Purchase of Cablevision Systems. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-altice-cablevision-cable-idUSKCN0XV00I>

19 Selyukh, Aliana & Baker, Liana B. (March 4, 2014). Comcast expands low-income service as merger review nears. Retrieved from: <http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-xpm-2014-03-04-sns-rt-us-usa-comcast-internet-20140304-story.html>

20 Brodtkin, Jon. Comcast expands \$10 low-income Internet plan. (July 15, 2016). Retrieved from: <https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2016/07/comcast-expands-10-low-income-internet-plan/>

21 Wolff-Mann, Ethan. (August 21, 2015). Retrieved from: <http://time.com/money/4005476/comcast-cheap-internet-seniors/>

22 <https://www.multichannel.com/news/charter-launches-low-cost-broadband-service-409143>

er case, AT&T proposed a plan to offer 12 months of 1.5 Mbps service for \$5 a month, or 5 Mbps for \$10, to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) households.²³ Negotiations resulted in agreement by AT&T to offer SNAP households a \$5 rate for the fastest available speed up to 5 Mbps, or \$10 for 10 Mbps, for up to four years. This agreement was included as a condition of the FCC's merger approval.²⁴

- In its CableVision merger case, Altice made commitments to both the New York Public Service Commission and the FCC²⁵ to create a \$15 per month, 30 Mbps rate offer for school lunch families, similar to Charter's. Altice later announced it was extending this "Economy Internet" program to former SuddenLink service areas²⁶.

As the Obama Administration ended its second term, Chairman Wheeler, Clyburn and their colleagues could point to discount programs for school lunch families and some other low-income consumers being planned or offered by all five of the largest U.S. cable providers -- Comcast, Charter, Altice, Cox Cable and Mediacom -- as well as discount service for SNAP house-

holds from the largest U.S. telecom provider, AT&T. One other merger-based program, CenturyLink's, had largely come to an end, but even it was (and still is) operating in three states²⁷. The oldest and biggest of the merger-originated programs, Comcast Internet Essentials, was (and still is) on an expansion track, well beyond the company's original merger obligation, with no apparent end in sight.

PROGRAMS OF NOTE

Comcast: Internet Essentials

Comcast's Internet Essentials, now in its seventh year, was the first of these programs to be agreed upon and implemented; the first (and so far the only) merger-agreement program to be extended by the provider past its original expiration date; the first to increase the speeds it offers users and the categories of customers who are eligible to enroll; and the only program to have provided regular, public documentation of its progress, including a third-party evaluation and significant user survey data after its third year.²⁸ (Comcast never asked to have the data in its annual compliance reports to the FCC redacted, unlike CenturyLink, AT&T and Charter.) Internet Essentials is unique in having an identifiable, per-

²³ AT&T Inc. via Federal Communications Commission. (July 1, 2015). Re Applications of AT&T Inc. and DIRECTV for Consent To Assign or Transfer Control of Licenses and Authorizations, MB Docket No. 14-90, Notice of Oral ex parte presentation. Retrieved from: <https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/60001111711.pdf>

²⁴ Federal Communications Commission (July 28, 2015). Memorandum Opinion and Order: In Matter of Applications of AT&T, Inc. and DIRECTV for Consent to Assign or Transfer Control of Licenses and Authorizations. Retrieved from: <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-15-94A1.pdf> (see pp. 164-166)

²⁵ Cablevisions Systems Corporation via Federal Communications Commission. (April 26, 2016). Retrieved from: <https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/60001692027.pdf>

²⁶ Baumgartner, Jeff. (September 19, 2017). Altice USA Broadens Reach of Low Cost Broadband Option. Retrieved from: <https://www.multichannel.com/news/altice-usa-broadens-reach-low-cost-broadband-option-415382>

²⁷ CenturyLink. (n.d.). CenturyLink Internet Basics. Retrieved from: <https://www.centurylink.com/home/internetbasics/>

²⁸ Horrigan, John B. (January 2015). Deepening Ties: Comcast Internet Essentials Customers Show Broader and Deeper Ties to the Internet Over Time—Especially Among Those Who Had Digital Literacy Skills Training. Retrieved from: <https://corporate.comcast.com/images/comcast-ie-report-2-horrigan.pdf>

sonal leader within a provider's senior management – Comcast Senior Executive Vice President David Cohen, who has been the face of the program since it was first proposed.

It's fair to say that Comcast has publicly "owned" its low-income broadband adoption program to a far greater extent than any other commercial provider.

So it's not surprising that Internet Essentials is the only one of the provider adoption efforts we've found to report having served more than a million customer households. Comcast reported reaching that milestone in its 2017 IE progress report, which also said the enrollment rate for the program was accelerating.²⁹ A year later the reported participation number is 1.5 households with an estimated 6 millions individual users.³⁰

Chairman Genachowski and Commissioner Clyburn hoped that Comcast's program would be a model for other providers, both for Connect-2Compete and for subsequent merger agreements. After seven years that hope seems to have been well-founded – at least in the sense that Internet Essentials seems to be a model program, whether or not it's actually being imitated by others.

To be clear: Internet Essentials' publicly released participation numbers and other metrics are all

self-reported. Comcast's obligation to file compliance reports to the FCC, with results subject to independent verification, ended in 2014.

There's no indication on the Internet Essentials program website that the current reported results have been audited.

So is it possible that Internet Essentials' 1.5 million households are partly hype? Yes, as far as we can say, that's possible. And there have been instances when the program's local totals -- which are not regularly made public, at least in the national progress reports -- have been questioned by activists on the ground... who also ask why a company with 25 million Internet customers, and many millions of unserved poor households in its service area, has only signed up a million and a half for heavily discounted access in eight years.

But even allowing for some corporate PR effect, the scale, ambition and apparent success of Comcast's effort are unique.

Mobile Citizen

Via local community partners, Mobile Citizen facilitates access to \$10/month broadband service on the Sprint Network. Mobile Citizen welcomes new partnerships with organizations sharing their mission to close the digital divide and to make affordable internet available for those that need it most. Interested organizations should fill out the

²⁹ Cohen, David L. Comcast Announces New Internet Essentials Program Milestones and Enhancements. (August 15, 2017). Retrieved from: <https://corporate.comcast.com/comcast-voices/comcast-announces-new-internet-essentials-program-milestones-and-enhancements>

³⁰ Comcast NBCUniversal. (2018). 2018 Progress Report. Retrieved from: https://update.comcast.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/33/dlm_uploads/2018/08/2018-Progress-Report-.pdf

“Get Started” form³¹ to initiate a conversation.

Mobile Beacon

PCs for People and Mobile Beacon partnered to create Bridging the Gap, a program that provides \$10/month broadband service on the Sprint Network to individuals and families under the 200% poverty level. Nonprofits and anchor institutions can become a Bridging the Gap³² partner and offer low-income families they serve the ability to purchase low cost internet and computers directly using an organization branded portal. Becoming a partner is free and the program is easy to administer. PCs for People handles all of the back end billing, customer service and technical support for your clients.

Additionally, Mobile Beacon provides nonprofits and anchor institutions the opportunity to receive donated hotspots for community programs such as hotspot lending through Mobile Beacon’s device donation program with TechSoup.³³ Eligible organizations can receive up to 11 donated devices per year.

THE ONE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS SUBSIDY - LIFELINE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Lifeline is currently the only government subsidy³⁴

providing financial support of internet access for low-income households. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), under the Reagan administration, created the Lifeline Assistance Program in 1985. It was first established as a mechanism to provide modest subsidies to low-income families for telephone services. The Lifeline program was expanded to include cell phone service under George W. Bush’s Administration. The program adapted to technological needs again in 2016, under the Obama Administration, by expanding Lifeline services to both fixed and wireless broadband.

Subscribers of a Lifeline service include some of society’s most vulnerable populations including veterans, the elderly, families with school-aged children, people of color, people with disabilities and domestic abuse survivors.

Unfortunately, under the Trump administration, Lifeline has been weakened. In November 2017, FCC Chairman Ajit Pai proposed a series of changes that would reduce the impact of the Lifeline program, effectively leaving millions of low-income households without access to 21st Century communications.³⁵ The Commission expects to vote on these changes in the remaining months of 2018.

³¹ Mobile Citizen. (n.d.). Getting Started is Easy. Retrieved from: <https://mobilecitizen.org/get-started>

³² PCs For People. (n.d.). Bridging the Gap. Retrieved from: <https://www.pcsforpeople.org/bridging-the-gap>

³³ Mobile Beacon. (n.d.). Techsoup Donation Program. Retrieved from: <https://www.mobilebeacon.org/techsoup/>

³⁴ Federal Communications Commission. (September 8, 2017). Lifeline Support for Affordable Communications. Retrieved from: <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/lifeline-support-affordable-communications>

³⁵ Federal Communications Commission. (October 26, 2017). Bridging the Digital Divide for Low-Income Consumers: Fourth Report and Order, Order on Reconsideration, Memorandum Opinion and Order, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, and Notice of Inquiry. Retrieved from: <https://www.fcc.gov/document/bridging-digital-divide-low-income-consumers>

Because broadband is expensive and Lifeline is the only federal support for low-income households, discount internet offers are an incredibly valuable resource.

ELIGIBILITY AND RESTRICTIONS

Most discount internet offers limit eligibility to households who fall into one of the following categories:

- Have a child who is eligible for the National School Lunch Program.
- Recipient of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- Currently receiving HUD housing assistance.
- A low-income Veteran receiving federal or state public assistance
- 62 years or older, receiving federal or state public assistance and live in Atlanta, Georgia; Boston, Massachusetts; Detroit, Michigan; Fresno County, California; Hartford County, Connecticut; Houston, Texas; Miami-Dade County, Florida; Palm Beach County, Florida; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; San Francisco, California; Santa Clara County, California; and Seattle, Washington.
- A Pell Grant recipient who is enrolled in a 2-year community college (only in Colorado and Illinois).

Unfortunately, that means there are people who are low-income on an economic scale; however,

they do not fall into any of the above categories.

In addition to qualification categories, there are additional barriers that can restrict an individual from gaining access to a discount internet offer.

Restrictions include:

- Service availability.
- No outstanding debt with the ISP.
- No subscription within the past 90 days with the ISP.
- No unreturned equipment with the ISP.

It is also important to note that the requirements change and sometimes differ depending on geographic location. We encourage conversations with ISPs about the offers in their areas.

The searchable tool available with this guidebook includes the eligibility and restrictions of each low-cost internet offer.

AFFORDABLE INTERNET: ONLY ONE PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

This guidebook centers on discount internet offers; however, it is important to note that a robust and reliable internet connection is only one part of the digital inclusion formula. People also need an appropriate device that connects to the internet and they need digital skills. These are all components of digital inclusion. As defined by NDIA, “Digital Inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Com-

munication Technologies (ICTs).”³⁶

Access to Reliable and Appropriate Devices

Access to devices that connect individuals to the internet remain a barrier for one’s ability to fully participate in an online environment. Many communities provide access to the internet via desktops/laptops in public spaces such as libraries or community centers; however, many of those spaces operate during typical business hours, which may be when a person is at their own workplace. Interviewees stated that it is necessary for individuals to have access to affordable and updated devices that give them the ability to connect to the internet 24-hours a day.

Digital Literacy Programs

The last piece to the connectedness puzzle is having skills to access the internet. Many practitioners involved in the creation of this guidebook stated that digital literacy classes are an integral part of their efforts to sustain a digitally inclusive community. These digital literacy classes cater to the various needs of the community, which include technology camps for children, introductory device use/internet use, internet safety, as well as specialized classes hosted by local school systems concerning how one can stay updated with their student’s education.

SUCCESSFUL OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Partnerships

As we highlighted in the previous section, digital inclu-

³⁶ National Digital Inclusion Alliance (March 18, 2018). Definitions. Retrieved from <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/>.

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

The Office of Performance Improvement and Innovation in Louisville, Kentucky, leveraged local partnerships in order to get devices in the hands of those community members who did not have access to devices. They successfully reached out to local banks and corporations in their community to obtain 500 computers that could be given to those who do not have access to computers at home. These computers were then refurbished by a computer science class at a local high school. Following the refurbishment process, some of the students were then able to take home the computers they refurbished and the remaining devices were distributed to public housing residents and refugee families in Louisville.

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

In order to provide members of the community access to devices in their homes, Vanderbilt University donated 3400 used desktops to the Community Foundation of Middle TN’s Digital Inclusion Fund. The foundation partnered with an equipment recycler who returned a refurbished laptop for every two desktops they received. These laptops were then distributed to children and families within the local community through initiatives such as “Anytime Access for All” and “ConnectHome Nashville.” This was all possible by leveraging local partnerships. It must also be noted that the majority of the practitioners state that laptops are the best devices to provide to families because they are mobile and can fit within anyone’s home.

sion programs are most successful when organizations leverage the already-existing relationships in their communities. Digital inclusion movements are dependent on and are most effective when a coalition of community members and organizations are part of the efforts. Moreover, it is imperative that organizations working to create a digitally inclusive society, reach out to trusted community organizations that have an established ties with members of the community. Some of those partnerships include schools, housing authorities, and various community-based organizations that currently engage in work relating to serving marginalized populations.

Trusted Community Members and Spaces

There are various methods that organizations use to get community members to sign up for discount internet offers. Many of the tactics work in tandem with each other and are not as effective in a siloed method. For example, flyers, leaflets and other signage does not work well alone. They are simply a gateway to getting the word out about the discount internet offers or they reinforce verbal conversations.

It is very important to meet community members who are in need of these services in trusted spaces. Some examples include:

- Encourage resident services representatives at housing authorities to talk to their residents about discount internet offers during community events or when new residents move into their housing units.
- Attend parent/teacher events at schools as a method of reinforcing written materials sent home

FRESNO, CALIFORNIA

The Fresno Housing Authority has several digital literacy classes in which they partner with other organizations, including summer technology camps for children that center on coding, learning about tech jobs, building computers, video games and even robotics. One of the strongest aspects of this program is the housing authority's attention to lessening the access barriers by providing transportation and food for those participating in the programs. The Fresno Housing Authority partners with the Fresno State University and local technology trade schools for assistance with teaching classes.

with students.

- Speak directly with community members who use public computers in spaces such as the the public library or community centers.

Interpersonal communication is very important at these events. Community members must trust the messenger in order to have a meaningful conversation about low-cost internet offers. Many practitioners stated that simply having a representative from the ISP at community events is not a strong method for acquiring participants in discount-internet offers programs. The discount internet offers are designed to help a specific population and require one-on-one consultation.

The ISP or organization representative must do their best to understand the circumstances that qualify an individual for the offer and not treat the interaction as an opportunity for a sale. In the words of one of the practitioners, “There has to be a human element.” Having a practitioner who understands not only the low cost offers, but also the eligibility requirements demonstrates the organization’s level of buy-in to community members. By inviting the ISP into a trusted space, the organization is choosing to become a single entity in the eyes of the community member. Meaning, due diligence is extremely important for the organization as they will have to act as the face of the program in the eyes of the community member.

Outreach to Community Members

The majority of survey participants stated that it is ineffective to only conduct outreach for discount internet offers via e-pamphlets and fliers. They stated that it is imperative employees and/or volunteers have direct in-person communication with individuals to reinforce and explain written communication.

Additionally, it is important to walk the individual through the sign-up steps. One resource that can be used to help facilitate this process is through the use of EveryoneOn.org. This resource allows individuals to go online on their own devices to see what low-cost internet offers are available in their area. In addition to this online resource, it is important for the local community to have low-cost internet offers listed on various websites including schools, government facilities, libraries and various community organizations.

In addition to online resources, the practitioner may choose to show the community member a simple flyer of the low-cost internet offers available in their area. The practitioner can then provide the next steps to the community member with a simple checklist and/or offer to assist the individual with sign-up. If a resident chooses to simply take the materials home with them, it is important to follow-up with these community members.

Additionally, it is important for practitioners to keep in mind that word of mouth remains the

best way for community members to sign up for discount internet offers. One of the practitioners stated the network effect is the best method for disseminating this information. When individuals have a positive experience with practitioners and ISPs, they will tell other friends and family members about the discount internet offer.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ISPS, FCC AND CONGRESS

According to Pew Research Center, the cost of home broadband service is the biggest barrier to broadband adoption.³⁷ This means the cost of broadband in the United States discourages home broadband subscription. NDIA and Public Knowledge make the following recommendations to internet service providers, the Federal Communications Commission and Congress.

1. Recommendations for ISPs:

- a. Provide resources to digital inclusion organizations who encourage low-income individuals and families to sign up for their programs.
- b. Provide a separate hotline and website to host discount internet offer information so that it is more accessible to interested parties or current subscribers.
- c. Adopt policies for discount internet offers that are more inclusive of those who are low-income but do not receive federal assistance.

- d. Reduce barriers to participation.
- e. Make discount internet subscription rates publicly available.
- f. ISPs who do not have low-cost offers should create these offers.
- g. Create easy to use online sign-up forms that can help individuals and community groups verify their eligibility.

2. Recommendations for the FCC:

- a. Encourage internet service providers to create or keep discount internet programs.
- b. Update Form 477 for more granular reporting of broadband coverage to ensure that areas not served do not erroneously appear as served in the FCC's broadband maps.
- c. Ensure the Lifeline Assistance Program can achieve its mission of assisting low-income families afford telephone and broadband services.
- d. Promote new and innovative programs that aim to tangibly close the digital divide.
- e. Allow unlicensed use in licensed frequencies where operations have not yet commenced.
- f. Require ISPs to have an online sign-up form for public use that meets federal accessibility requirements.

3. Recommendations to Congress:

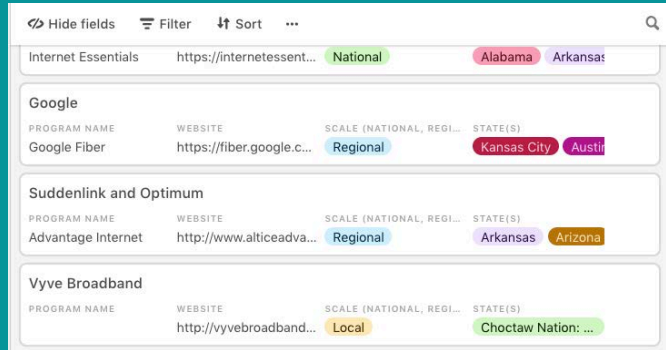
³⁷ Pew Research Center. (December 21, 2015). Home Broadband 2015. Retrieved from: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/12/21/home-broadband-2015/>

- a. Allocate funds for creating/sustaining digitally inclusive communities in urban and rural areas.
- b. Support bills such as Dig Once/ Climb Once that drive down cost of deployment.
- c. Implement laws that promote competition at the household level.
- d. Support Lifeline including dictating a subsidy amount that rises with inflation.
- e. Modernize Universal Service Funding (USF) to ensure that USF programs can achieve their mission.
- f. Advocate for dig once policies for any infrastructures that are federal, which will allow for deployment of conduits so that it is easier to place fiber in communities.
- g. Allocate additional spectrum for exclusive unlicensed use in low, mid and high frequency bands.
- h. Encourage spectrum sharing between licensed, unlicensed and federal users to promote more efficient spectrum use.

RESOURCES

The Discount Internet Guidebook's searchable tool includes the following information as applicable for each discount offer:

- Program Name
- Website
- Scale - Local, Regional or National
- State(s) in which the service is available.
*Note - Service may not be available throughout the whole state.**
- Monthly price for service
- Program length - including time limits for service and expected end dates of some programs
- Maximum advertised upload and download speeds
- Data caps
- Eligibility
- Restrictions




<https://discounts.digitalinclusion.org/offers>

These discount internet flyers were created by DANENet and Louisville Metro. They distribute the flyers at events, door to door and through their partners.

Low-Cost Internet Plans

The world is going digital.
Get home Internet connection so that you and your family can enjoy:

- Email
- Homework
- Job searches
- Paying bills online
- Sharing photos
- And so much more!



Bring the Internet home for \$10 or \$20 a month.

access \$10
from AT&T

Eligibility Requirements:

- SNAP Card

Features

- Speed: 10 mb/s or 5 mb/s
- Free Wifi router

How to Sign Up

- Call: 855-220-5211
- Online: ATT.com/Access

Spectrum Internet Assist \$20

Eligibility Requirements:

- Free or Reduced Lunch
- 65 or Older on SSI

Features

- Speed: 30 mb/s
- \$15 service + \$5 for WiFi

How to Sign Up

- Call: 844-525-1574
- SpectrumInternetAssist.com

Want to learn more about Louisville's Digital Inclusion efforts?
Visit DigitalInclusion.louisvilleky.gov



Internet Options for Low-Income Households

Wired – you plug into something in your home

| Access from AT&T | Spectrum Internet Assist |
|---|--|
| <p>Cost: \$10/per month for 10 mb/s</p> <p>Requirements: Households with at least one resident who participates in SNAP</p> <p>Lives in the AT&T service area</p> <p>No outstanding debt for AT&T internet service within last six months.</p> <p>Details: No contract No deposit No installation fee Includes home Wi-Fi Cannot be part of packages</p> <p>Sign-Up: Online: https://www.att.com/shop/internet/access/</p> <p>By Phone: English 855.220.5211 Spanish 855.220.5225</p> | <p>Cost: \$14.99 per month for 30 mb/s</p> <p>Requirements: Households with at least one member in the National School Lunch Program, free or reduced cost lunch or the supplemental security income (SSI) program for individuals over 65.</p> <p>Live in Spectrum / Charter service area.</p> <p>Not a current customer</p> <p>Details: No contract Wi-fi available for \$5 more per month Can add TV and voice for additional \$</p> <p>Sign-Up: By Phone: 1-844-525-1574</p> <p>Check availability online: https://www.spectrum.com/browse/content/spectrum-internet-assist.html</p> |

Wireless – Mobile wireless hotspots connect to them without wires, 4G

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| <p>Mobile Beacon</p> <p>Cost: Hardware about \$75 plus \$10 - \$15 per month</p> <p>Requirements: Recipient must be below the 200% poverty level or be currently enrolled in an income-based government assistance program. Must live in a Sprint service area. Must prepay. Must provide proof of eligibility annually.</p> <p>Details: Unlimited 4G LTE service, no throttle, up to 10 hours of battery life, connect up to 10 devices. If using this device with a desktop computer, wireless adapter will need to be connected to the computer.</p> <p>Sign-up: Online http://www.pcsforpeople.com/recipients/low-cost-internet By Phone: PCs for People 651-354-2552</p> |
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www.everyoneonmadison.org

608-274-3107

A Project of DANENet