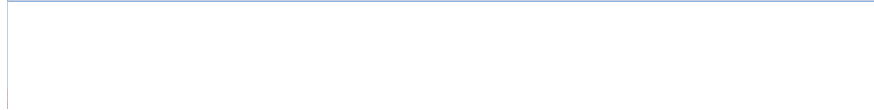


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TECHNOLOGY

Free broadband service is available to many Californians. Here's how to apply



Many Californians who qualify aren't taking advantage of free or low-cost broadband. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

BY JON HEALEY | SENIOR EDITOR, UTILITY JOURNALISM

SEPT. 29, 2021 11:39 AM PT

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted just how important it is to have a broadband internet connection at home — for remote school or work, virtual doctor's exams and

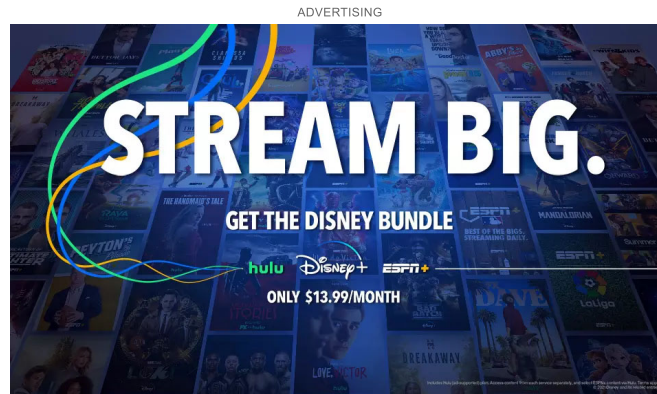


speed line and a device with which to use it.

Dozens of internet service providers all across California have signed up for the program, which covers up to \$50 of the monthly cost of an internet connection (or up to \$75 on tribal lands). The program also authorizes a one-time \$100 discount on a computer or other device.

The new benefit is a major upgrade over the Federal Communication Commission's Lifeline program, which provides only \$9.25 a month. The average cost of the most popular broadband connection is [\\$48 a month](#), according to the broadband trade association USTelecom.

But while the subsidies have been generous and widely available, they don't appear to have brought many more people online.



As of Sunday, 732,201 households in the state had enrolled in the program, according to the [FCC](#). As large as that number may seem, it's only about 20% of the households that are [likely to be eligible](#). And Sunne Wright McPeak, chief executive of the California Emerging Technology Fund, said the bulk of the Californians who have signed up appear to be people who already had broadband through the internet service providers' discount programs for low-income residents — not people with no access to the internet.

The problem, McPeak said, is that eligible Californians don't know about the program, "and nobody is telling them."

John Horrigan, a senior fellow at the Benton Institute for Broadband and Society, said a new survey of low- and lower-moderate-income households found that only 25% had heard of the Emergency Broadband Benefit. One reason, he said, is that the government provided no funding to publicize the program and reach out to prospective users.



however, aren't likely to see those messages.

If you would like a broadband connection but can't afford one, here's how to apply for the Emergency Broadband Benefit. If you already have broadband but know someone who doesn't, pass this information along. Better yet, help them fill out the application.



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Who qualifies?

The FCC's website lays out a number of ways to qualify based on your income or COVID-related hardship:

- Your household income is no more than 135% of the [federal poverty level](#). In California and most other states, that [translates](#) to about \$17,400 per year for a single individual or \$35,800 for a family of four.
- You or a dependent are enrolled in at least one of the major federal safety net programs, including food stamps, Medi-Cal or tribal assistance.
- You earned up to \$99,000 as an individual or \$198,000 as a couple, but your household lost substantial income during the pandemic because of a layoff or furlough.
- A member of your household received a federal Pell Grant for college in the current award year or qualified for reduced-price school lunches in the current or two previous school years.
- Your household is eligible for an internet service provider's discounted broadband service.

Each household can obtain only one discounted broadband line, however.



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How do you sign up?

According to the FCC, participants in the Lifeline program can apply for Emergency Broadband Benefits through their internet provider. The same may be true for people enrolled in an internet provider's discounted broadband plan.



identifying information (e.g., your Social Security or driver's license number), attest to your household size and income level, and indicate whether you suffered a COVID-related income loss or are enrolled in certain federal safety net programs. You'll also need to back up your application with [documents](#), such as a statement of benefits or a tax return.

Once you've been approved for the subsidies, you'll need to find an internet provider who's participating in the program. The [FCC website has a list](#) that you can search by ZIP Code or city. From there, you'll need to call the internet provider and sign up. Different companies impose different fees and restrictions (such as monthly data caps) on their broadband accounts, so be sure to compare the offerings from local phone, cable TV and wireless companies.

The FCC won't tell you which companies are also providing discounted computers, tablets or other devices you could use to browse the internet. According to McPeak, none of the major internet providers in California are doing so. A number of carriers are instead applying part of the monthly discount to the fee they charge for modems or routers.

Once you've gotten approved and signed up for service, the government will pay the subsidies directly to your broadband provider.

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When will the program end?

The federal government launched the Emergency Broadband Benefit in May, intending to run the program until the \$3.1 billion provided by Congress ran out. So far, [\\$600 million has been claimed](#); with about 6 million households participating, it would take roughly eight months to spend the remaining \$2.5 billion if no one else signed up.

Congress may give the program a longer runway, however, while also reducing the subsidy amount. The [bipartisan infrastructure bill](#) awaiting final action in the House includes \$14.2 billion for the effort, which would be renamed the "Affordable Connectivity Program" and allowed to continue indefinitely.

The subsidy would be reduced to \$30 a month, but internet providers would be required to let you apply the subsidy to any tier of service — potentially opening up lower-cost offerings to you.



who don't already have broadband. McPeak said that enlisting the help of trusted members of the community is key to closing the digital divide. And according to Horrigan, research shows that "low-income households trust internet service providers less than libraries or nonprofits."

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Jon Healey is a senior editor on the Utility Journalism team, which tries to help readers solve problems, answer questions and make big decisions about life in and around Los Angeles. He has been with the Los Angeles Times since 2000, previously reporting on technology news and writing opinion pieces.



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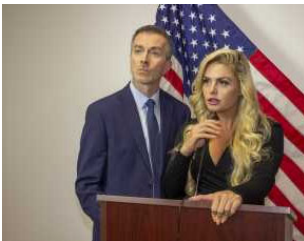
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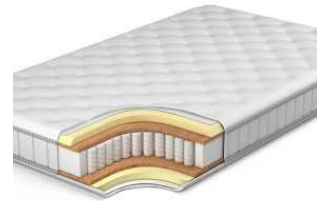
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