

<https://lookout.co/santacruz/civic-life/story/2021-12-13/santa-cruz-county-residents-apply-help-paying-broadband-internet-continued-pandemic-relief>



Time running out for Santa Cruz County residents to apply for help paying for broadband

By [Grace Stetson](#)

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With 2022 just weeks away, many families are still feeling the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in relation to a modern necessity: reliable internet. One federal program could provide relief for Santa Cruz County residents — and all they need to do is apply by Dec. 31.

Operated by the Federal Communications Commission, [the Emergency Broadband Benefit \(EBB\) program](#) is an opportunity for families and households to apply for financial assistance. Eligible households can receive up to \$50 per month toward broadband services, as well as a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer or tablet from participating providers.

Interested individuals are required to meet one of the following eligibility criteria:

- An income at or below 135% of federal poverty guidelines
- Participation in certain assistance programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid or [Lifeline](#)
- Approved for free or reduced-price school lunch/breakfast programs in the 2019-20, 2020-21 or 2021-22 school years
- Received a federal Pell Grant in the current year
- Experienced substantial income loss due to job loss or furlough since Feb. 29, 2020, and total household income for 2020 is at or below \$99,000 for single filers and \$198,000 for joint filers
- Meets criteria for participating provider's existing low-income or COVID-19 relief program

The EBB program is due to be replaced in March by the Affordable Connectivity Program as part of a new long-term federal investment; anyone who's enrolled in EBB would transition automatically, though they will see the monthly benefit shrink to \$30.

The federal program complements a more localized program for Santa Cruzans that launched in September 2020 to assist in the return to the classroom. [Equal Access Santa Cruz County](#) is a

partnership between Cruzio Internet and the Community Foundation Santa Cruz County that aims to deliver high-speed broadband communitywide regardless of income level.

James Hackett, director of business operations and development for Cruzio, told Lookout on Monday that the EBB program is a “fantastic use of federal funds” that could extend the work the Equal Access program has done over the past 16 months.

“At this point, we’ve built out 13 new internet hubs, getting 700 students connected to very-low-cost internet access,” he said of the program, which is ongoing but relies on donations. “Thanks to the generosity of local donors, we’ve built out enough internet infrastructure to serve about 2,000 students, covering over 30% of Watsonville and South County.”

As Hackett explained, one of the continued major challenges is the issue of broadband affordability, which has often been the focus of state and federal stimulus programs targeting unserved or underserved communities in both rural and urban areas across the United States.

County Supervisor Zach Friend has promoted the federal program through his office and through community partnerships, but said that one of the challenges is connecting with the people who could benefit.

“There has to be a wider effort to meet people where they are — there has also been an understandable distrust of signing up for government-based programs,” he said. “One of the questions that remains to be seen is if that \$30 a month will be enough to help equalize us, because especially in our area, it’s very expensive to receive internet access.”

Even with the challenges, however, Friend said that he appreciates the state and federal governments have come together for the EBB program in a “way I’ve never seen historically.”

Further, he believes it’s imperative to look at broadband as infrastructure, and as a way to create other community benefits.

“An overall investment in the system could set up a lower-cost, greater-access system for however it is people access the internet,” he said, noting that [a March 2021 California Emerging Technology Fund study](#) found 15% of households access the internet through smartphone only. “This is an essential step, it’s not the only step. ... EBB is a small microcosm of a larger issue.”

With EBB, Hackett believes the issues of affordability and availability will be addressed for both rural and urban communities in Santa Cruz County. Cruzio will refocus on EBB outreach and education in 2022, as the next round of funding becomes available in January.

“It means we can help twice as many people with the funds we raise,” he said. “We want to make our Equal Access funds go further.”

For more information on how to apply for funding, [visit the federal site here](#).