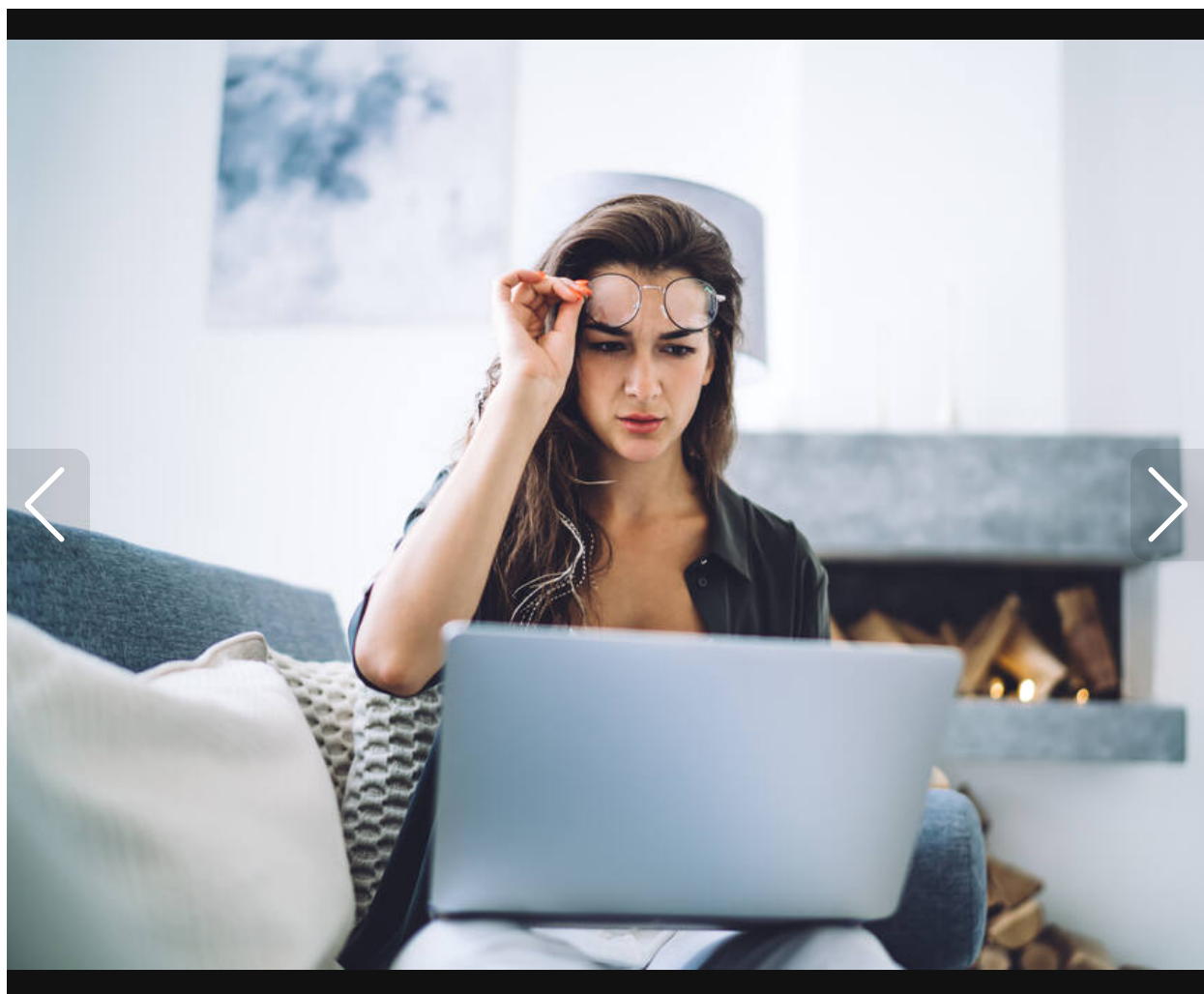


# What happened when readers tried signing up for the government's subsidized internet program?

Some succeeded, but many faced challenges. Here's how to persevere and your most common questions answered. | 



## SLIDE 2 OF 2

The process to sign up for the Affordable Connectivity Program is supposed to be relatively simple, but Press Democrat readers faced challenges. Here's what they encountered and your most common questions answered. (GaudiLab / Shutterstock)

**MARISA ENDICOTT**

## Some succeeded, but many faced challenges. Here's what they encountered and your most common questions answered.

After [last week's column](#) on low enrollment in the federal government's free or discounted internet subsidy, the [Affordable Connectivity Program](#), I heard from a lot of readers about their experiences trying to sign up.

The [process is supposed to be relatively simple](#). After applying to the program by submitting proof of eligibility, which is based on income or participation in various safety net programs, participants then contact and enroll with a [partner internet service provider](#).

While participation is voluntary, more than 1,300 internet companies so far have partnered with the federal program, which secures a \$30 monthly bill reduction for low-income households (or a \$75 discount for qualifying residents on tribal lands). [As of May](#), some 20 major providers agreed to offer a high-speed internet option at the same cost as the federal subsidy — making it free.

Some readers told me they'd never heard of the program. Some said they had but didn't realize

## Answers to your most asked questions

### Participating providers:

A full list of the internet providers participating in the Affordable Connectivity Program in California is available at: [www.fcc.gov/affordable-connectivity-program-providers#California](http://www.fcc.gov/affordable-connectivity-program-providers#California), or you can search the internet companies nearest you: [www.affordableconnectivity.gov/companies-near-me/](http://www.affordableconnectivity.gov/companies-near-me/).

A list of the 20 providers that offer a high-speed internet plan for \$30 per month or less (making it free with the ACP discount) is available at [www.whitehouse.gov/getinternet/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/getinternet/).

### Eligibility:

You're [eligible](#) for Affordable Connectivity Program benefits if your income is \$27,180 or less, For two people, your household income must be \$36,620 or less. For three people it must be \$46,060 or less, and for a family of four it must be \$55,500 or less. (Add \$9,000 for each additional member.)

[Alternatively](#), eligibility can be achieved if one member of the household is enrolled in:

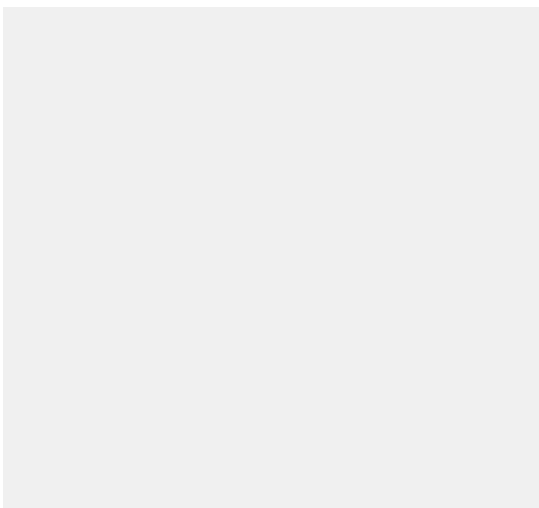
– [Support services for Indigenous communities](#), like Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, or...

they qualified, and many others ran into issues trying to apply, which either slowed down their enrollment or discouraged them altogether.

Sunne Wright McPeak, president and CEO of the [California Emerging Technology Fund](#), a nonprofit focused on equitable and affordable internet access, said that, based on interviews, focus groups and the experiences of local partner organizations, barriers to sign-up come down to a 60-40 problem.

About 60% of people simply don't know about the program. Of the remaining 40%, half will be turned off by bureaucratic inefficiencies and runarounds by internet companies. The other half need to be walked through the process, be it because of language barriers, disabilities or lack of internet access or digital literacy.

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Robert and Joanne Darling applied to the program after reading last week's article.

- A [federal assistance program](#), like a free or reduced school lunch or food stamps program, Medi-Cal or Supplemental Security Income, Lifeline, and Pell Grants.

Guidance on necessary eligibility documentation can be found at: <https://www.affordableconnectivity.gov/how-to-apply/show-you-qualify/>.

#### **Application process:**

Applicants can sign up online at [www.internetforallnow.org/applytoday/](http://www.internetforallnow.org/applytoday/) or by calling a program coordinator at 866-696-8748. You can also call the federal help line at 877-384-2575.

People can also print and fill out applications that come in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) and mail them with [eligibility documentation](#) to Affordable Connectivity Program Support Center, P.O. Box 7081, London, KY 40742.

#### **Complaints:**

If you have issues with your chosen internet provider involving the program that you haven't been able to resolve, [you can file a consumer complaint](#) with the FCC by filling out an [online form](#) (select "availability" under internet issues). Alternatively, you can call 888-225-5322. Para presentar una queja en español, llamar al: 888-225-5322.

“I knew about it before, but I really didn’t know how to go about getting at it and finding out whether or not we qualify,” Robert Darling told me.

They went through a bit of a back-and-forth submitting the right documentation to prove their eligibility, but eventually, they were approved. And while their internet provider, Hughes Network Systems, doesn’t offer a plan that would render service free, they secured a \$30-a-month discount.

“While completing the application and getting set up with Hughes was quite a hassle (especially for a couple of late 80-year-olds),” the Darlings wrote in an email, “we were able to work through it and are grateful to receive the benefit.”

Others, though, weren’t so successful.

Some of you said you felt daunted by the effort of gathering and submitting the right eligibility proof or concerned about submitting such personal data because of the prevalence of scams.

There were also issues with user error, given that the process, especially when done online, can be especially tricky for those who don’t speak English or are less digitally literate, elderly or disabled — some of the primary targets for the program.

From the sample size of readers I spoke to, people had the most success when calling the state program coordinator or federal helplines.

## **Challenges with internet providers**

Maria Solarez in Sonoma got approved for the program without much issue. “That part was pretty straightforward,” she told me.

But, when she went to apply the discount through Comcast, she was denied. She reapplied and was denied again. For her third attempt, she called the Affordable Connectivity Program coordinator hotline, and a representative found a way to contact Comcast by phone and joined her in a call.

She's now waiting to hear if she'll finally be approved.

"I don't know if I'll ever be successful getting a discount on my internet even though I qualify," Solarez said. If she's rejected again, she might give up, she added. Though the hotline representatives gave her "a little bit of hope," the time and energy invested without result so far is frustrating.

Indeed, from what I heard, the most common problem people encountered came when trying to sign up with internet providers. For many, the process is online, which limits support, or sales representatives give mixed messages about costs, eligibility and options.

While the experience differs company to company and even between customer service agents, "households are being upsold left and right," McPeak told me. "There has to be better training and an attempt by the companies to actually want to promote this opportunity."

She said companies need to focus more on enrolling new customers but noted recent improvements, including more prominent advertising and coordination with state agencies.

Scott Wilson, a military veteran who deals with cognitive challenges from a brain tumor, attempted to enroll in free internet and ended up with two bills — one from Xfinity and one from parent company Comcast — and extra services and charges he didn't want.

He had incredible difficulty reaching anyone by phone, and while he eventually canceled his account, he received a collection letter months later, which he said a company representative recently acknowledged was in error.

"If you're having enough challenges to begin with, you don't need all of this," Wilson told me. "I just don't trust these companies."

Fears of encountering similar headaches are enough to deter some people from pursuing the discount.

For instance, after David Judice found out none of the companies offering a free plan with

the program serve his area in Ukiah, he hit pause on his efforts. He was put off by the idea of potentially dealing with unexpected charges or pushy salespeople when shopping around with his \$30 subsidy.

Lorena Hernandez, California director of community impact for Comcast, said she hasn't heard complaints of customers being denied or upsold lately. She noted the company has long been dedicated to providing affordable service, connecting 1.4 million low-income Californians to the internet through its discount programs over the years, and partnering with nonprofits to provide underserved communities with digital literacy training.

She said the company is invested in "spreading the word about the Affordable Connectivity Program to the community," pointing to its traditional and social media advertising and marketing materials in 35 languages. She did not have data on how many new customers had been enrolled through the program.

## **Community mobilization**

The types of barriers readers have faced are the motivation behind a joint effort by California agencies, spearheaded by the California Emerging Technology Fund, to increase awareness and enrollment and engage trusted government entities and community-based organizations in the process.

On top of investing in the program's coordinator phone line, the first month of the campaign is culminating in statewide events with bilingual support Aug. 27 to help people sign up in person. New locations are regularly being added, and a full list of locations and timing is available at [www.internetforallnow.org/events/get-connected-california/](http://www.internetforallnow.org/events/get-connected-california/).

For now, the closest site is in San Jose, but McPeak noted they are actively encouraging internet providers, city and county agencies, school districts, nonprofits and others to partner in hosting more events in Northern California.

Interested entities and organizations can reach out at [www.internetforallnow.org/contact-us/](http://www.internetforallnow.org/contact-us/).

“There is basically no resistance of any significance in the population to being online,” McPeak said. “There is a need for the bureaucracies to help them...that's the big issue.”

While internet hasn't been a priority for Judice, he's come around some and would like to be able to use YouTube and Netflix and access educational programming online.

“I'm older, and I never got into it until recently,” he said. While trying to sign up for internet has been a bit cumbersome and aggravating, he's going to persist eventually. “In this day and age, you have to have it,” Judice told me.

The process has been “foggy,” he said, “but I'm trying.”

*“In Your Corner” is a new column that puts watchdog reporting to work for the community. If you have a concern, a tip, or a hunch, you can reach “In Your Corner” Columnist Marisa Endicott at 707-521-5470 or marisa.endicott@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @InYourCornerTPD and Facebook @InYourCornerTPD.*

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