



As Federal Internet Discount Program Ends, Here Are Some Low-Cost Options

By [Nereida Moreno](#)



L.A. County's Delete the Divide program helps connect people to devices and digital skills training. (Ashley Balderrama/LAist)

Millions of Californians are seeing higher internet bills this month as a federal pandemic-era discount program for low-income people continues to wind down.

The Affordable Connectivity Program gave eligible households a \$30 broadband discount, and up to \$75 for those on qualifying Tribal lands. One in five households in the state were enrolled as of February. Recipients may receive a [partial discount](#) in May,

but unless Congress provides additional funding, the \$14.2 billion program is set to run out of money by the end of the month.

Last October, the Biden administration asked lawmakers for a [\\$6 billion extension](#). Until then, local nonprofits and service providers are offering their own discounts to help keep people connected.

“It's extremely devastating for a lot of families,” said Graeme Jackson of the nonprofit Human-I-T. “Folks don't really know what's next.”

The group offers low-cost internet plans and devices, as well as free online digital skills training in English and Spanish. Jackson said they've been preparing for the end of the ACP for months, and recently launched a new promotion called the [California Connectivity Bundle](#) to help fill the gap.

For \$135, low-income residents can get a Chromebook, a mobile hotspot and three months of prepaid internet service. There's no contract required. After three months, you would pay \$15 a month.

“We have been trying to make sure we can at least cut down the cost as much as we can for folks to just still have what they need,” Jackson said.

Here are other discounts and service options for Californians:

Government discounts

Lifeline is a [federal subsidy](#) program for low-income households. It provides a \$9.25 monthly discount off the cost of phone, internet or bundled services. To qualify, a household income must be 135% or less than the Federal Poverty Guidelines, or \$40,500 for a family of four.

California has its own subsidy program called LifeLine with a capital “L.” You can use the [state's website to apply](#) for both discounts at once.

Community Broadband Networks

Los Angeles County recently announced the launch of its own high-speed broadband service aimed at low-income residents in South L.A., East L.A. and Boyle Heights, with plans as low as \$25 per month. The service could be available later this year, and will be offered through public-private partnerships called Community Broadband Networks.

Eligibility requirements include a household income below 200% of the federal poverty line or receiving government benefits like SNAP, Medicaid or free/reduced lunch.

The county also partners with the nonprofit [EveryoneOn](#) to expand internet access. You can [plug in your address here](#) or on the [state's website here](#) to find a list of programs in your neighborhood, including low-cost internet plans and digital skills training.

Other resources

This tool from the group BroadbandNow allows you to [plug in your zip code](#) and compare internet plans and prices in your area.

Internet for All Now, an initiative of the California Emerging Technology Fund, also helps residents find low-cost plans. You can call (833) 938-3298 to speak with an expert and get help enrolling, or [go online](#) for a list of available offers.



California Cuts \$2 Billion in Broadband Funding. Here's What It Means

Story by Joe Supan

• 1w • [3 min read](#)



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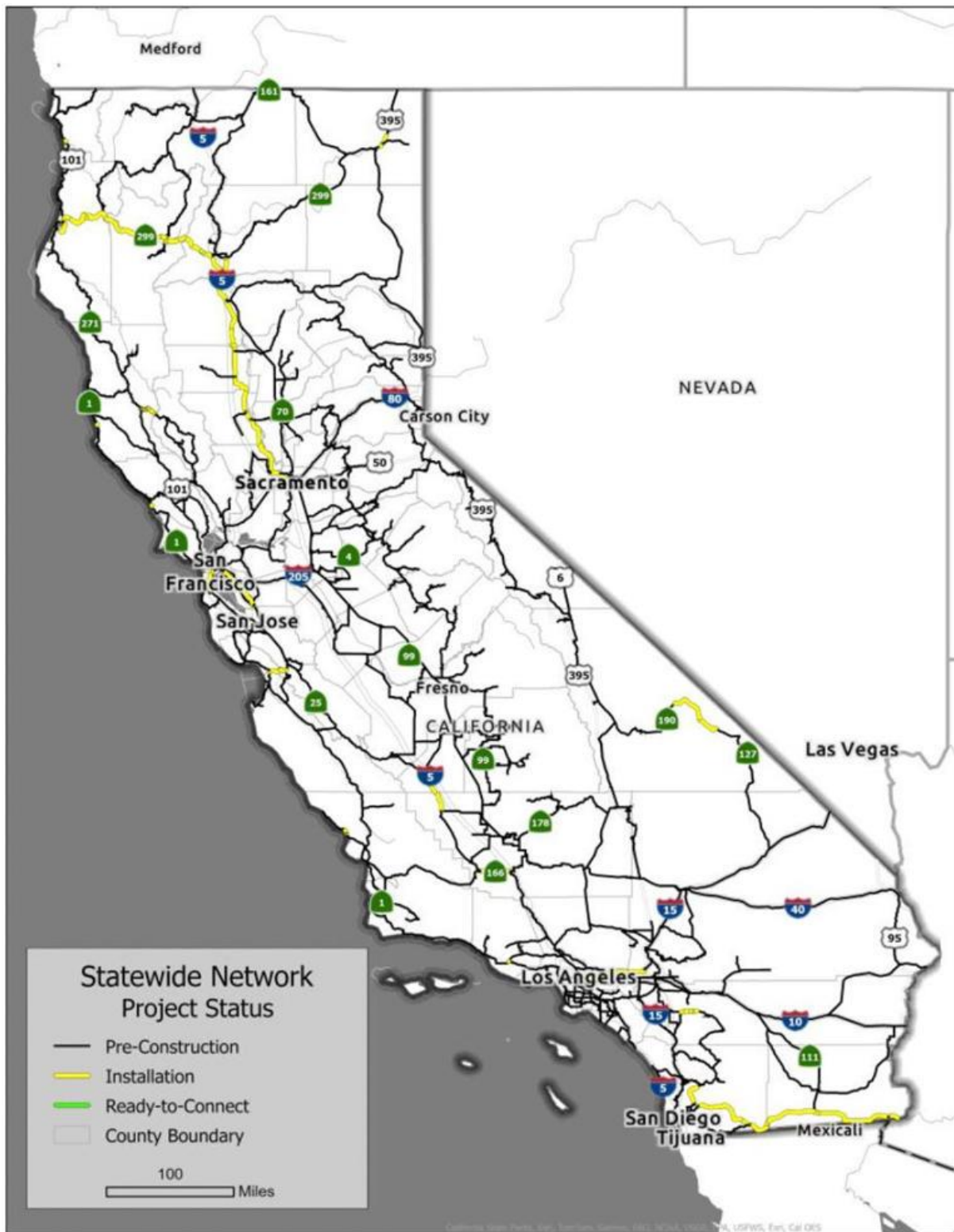
The [digital divide](#) just grew a little wider in California, as Gov. Gavin Newsom [announced](#) on Friday that he would be slashing \$2 billion for broadband from the state budget.

"These are programs, propositions that I've long advanced -- many of them," Newsom said as he began outlining his budget. "But you've got to do it. We have to be responsible. We have to be accountable."

Newsom is attempting to balance a budget deficit of \$27.6 billion for the fiscal year that starts July 1. The move comes at a difficult moment for internet consumers. The [Affordable Connectivity Program](#), which provides \$30 to \$75 monthly to help low-income families pay for internet, will officially be out of money by the end of May. [California](#) has more residents enrolled in the ACP than any other state, at [2.9 million](#).

What broadband initiatives will be impacted?

Newsom's new budget plan will [cut \\$1.5 billion](#) from the state's Middle-Mile Broadband Initiative, a [\\$5 billion project](#) signed into law in 2021 that aims to install more than 10,000 miles of fiber-optic cable to areas that have little or no high-speed internet coverage. This would make it more attractive for internet providers to connect in rural, tribal and minority urban communities, where they've often been hesitant to build infrastructure to themselves.



California has installed 747 out of a planned 9,817 miles of the Middle-Mile Broadband Initiative. California Middle-Mile Broadband Initiative© Provided by CNET

Some 91% of California households have internet service -- significantly higher than the 80% for the US as a whole - but an estimated [3.5 million people](#) [CETF

Website: <https://www.cetfund.org/more-than-3-million-californians-cant-afford-or-access-the-internet/>] remain disconnected in the state. All projects in the Middle-Mile Broadband Initiative were required to be completed by December 2026.

Another program impacted by the budget cuts is the [Broadband Loan Loss Reserve Fund](#), which helps local governments, tribes and nonprofits secure financing for building last-mile projects.

The state legislature has until June 15 to pass the budget, which gives digital equity advocates just over a month to negotiate the spending cuts.

Low-income internet options in California

While California's budget cuts will largely affect *access* to high-speed internet in the state, cost is actually the main barrier for most residents. According to a survey conducted by the California Emerging Technology Fund, residents spend an average of \$83.60 per month on home internet -- about [\\$9 more](#) than the country as a whole. As the ACP expires this month, here are some other low-income internet options available in California:

- **Access from AT&T:** AT&T is one of the largest internet providers in California, with service available to 57% of residents, according to [data from the Federal Communications Commission](#). It offers discounted internet plans to low-income residents of \$30 per month for speeds up to 100Mbps. It has the same eligibility requirements as the ACP: income at or below 200% of the [Federal Poverty Guidelines](#), or participation in a federal program like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Supplemental Security Income or the National School Lunch program.

- **Cox:** Cox has two discounts available for low-income households. Its Connect2Compete plan is for families with at least one K-12 student, while its ConnectAssist plan is open to anyone who participates in a qualifying government assistance program.
- **Lifeline:** This federal program provides a discount of \$9.25 per month on home internet, or \$34.25 for families living on tribal lands. Your household will qualify if your income is less than or equal to 135% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines.
- **Spectrum Internet Assist:** This discounted internet plan from Spectrum gets you speeds up to 50Mbps for \$25 per month. You must participate in one of three programs to qualify for the discount: National School Lunch Program, Community Eligibility Provision or Supplemental Security Income (for applicants age 65 or older only).
- **Verizon Forward:** Verizon offers wireless internet service to a little over 30% of California households. Discounted internet is available for as low as \$20 per month, but you may have to bundle with a cellphone plan to get that price.
- **Xfinity Internet Essentials:** Xfinity has one of the most generous discounts around, with plans starting at \$10 per month for low-income customers and speeds up to 50Mbps. There are a number of programs that will qualify you for Xfinity Internet Essentials, including the ACP.

Connecting Minority Communities Pilot Program



The Digital Divide is the gap between those who benefit from the rapidly evolving technologies of the Digital Age and those who do not. Poor and less-educated minority communities are more likely to be without digital devices and skills and therefore, unable to access the Internet and other information and communication technologies. This digital disparity has left these communities at an economic disadvantage where they are unable or less able to obtain digital information to better their lives. Long recognized as a barrier to prosperity, many agencies both at the national and state levels have taken steps to close the digital gap; however, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a bifurcation where the gap is closing for some but widening for others. Every day this disparity persists, and at-risk communities become more digitally excluded.

Mitigating the barriers to digital inclusion is complex and community-specific and cannot be resolved by a single approach. California State University, Sacramento (Sacramento State), and members of the Consortium are taking a more collaborative approach. Sacramento State, a Minority Serving Institution (MSI), the fifth most diverse college campus among regional universities in the West, and an 'Anchor University,' Sacramento State is committed to bringing digitally challenged communities into the Digital Age by joining other like-missioned anchor institutions and community-based organizations to align and use their

combined resources and human capital to even the digital playing field for communities similar to Lemon Hill in struggling with digital exclusion.

The overarching goal of this project is to empower both students and the Lemon Hill community with the capacity to significantly improve broadband access, adoption, and digital literacy that will serve as a model to expand to other neighborhoods in the Greater Sacramento region and create more opportunities for digital equity that lead to inclusive economic development. Lemon Hill community members will benefit from the following services offered at Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and the Community Engagement Lab (CEL): signing up for eligible low-cost Internet programs including the Emergency Broadband Benefit program (to be replaced by the long-term Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)); access subsidized or low-cost devices; access the Internet with existing resources; use broadband/internet services for telehealth, education, job seeking, and economic development; address concerns about security and safety and overcome language barriers; assistance with technical support; develop digital literacy skills to improve their quality of life. Community knowledge and trusting relationships are foundational to these outcomes.

Project Plan

This project will train 100 undergraduate students from Lemon Hill and the surrounding 95824 zip code using a Digital Skills for Community Curriculum developed by faculty at Sacramento State, Sacramento City College, and Consumes River College. The 4-week training will be offered three times during the two years, summer and winter breaks. Once trained, the Digital Navigator Interns will be deployed among funded and unfunded Community-Based Organizations members, and under their direction, they will serve as teaching assistants, interns, and mentors in digital learning spaces where they will help residents:

- assess their needs and guide them toward suitable resources;
- sign up for eligible low-cost internet programs including the Emergency Broadband Benefit program (to be replaced by the long-term Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP));
- access subsidized or lowcost devices;
- access the Internet with existing resources;
- use broadband/internet services for telehealth, education, job seeking and economic development;
- address concerns about security and safety and overcome language barriers;
- provide technical support, and
- help community members develop digital literacy skills to improve their quality of life. Community knowledge and trusting relationships are foundational to these outcomes.

In addition, Sacramento State will establish a Community Engagement Lab (CEL) at Sacramento State during the first year while building capacity for an additional CEL at

Sacramento City College during the second year. The Sacramento State CEL will accommodate 30 people at a time and is a vibrant and welcoming center that will provide broadband and technology access to the community during the week and on Saturdays. The CEL will have all the essential software and equipment, be staffed by Digital Navigator Interns, and have scheduled access to community training or open lab time for both Digital Navigator Interns and community participants to work together or individually.

Community Based Organizations:

Please get to know our community partners!



Asian Resources, Inc.

[Asian Resources, Inc. \(ARI\)](#) is a nonprofit community-based organization established in 1980 dedicated to providing multiple social services needed in our community and empowering everyone we serve to become a vital part of our changing diverse society.

Community activists formed ARI in 1980 to address the needs of the Asian newcomer community in Sacramento. Through surveys, interviews, and community meetings, these activists recognized that the burgeoning Asian newcomer community had critical needs for job assistance, English classes, youth and senior programs, and health education. In response, they operated a youth employment project and health clinic at the Asian Community Center.

Here, these activists identified the need for a long-term program focused on job placement, training, and English-as-a-Second Language classes. As a result, ARI was born.

Throughout its history, ARI has committed itself to serving and responding to the needs of the limited English and low-income communities in Sacramento. Guided by a Board of Directors representing its constituents, ARI has remained committed to hiring its staff from the very community it serves. This ensures a direct and dynamic link between staff & client and agency & community with a link grounded in empathy and compassion.

ARI was established to connect community members to self-sufficiency. We meet job seekers' training needs, and we serve the region's staffing needs by connecting people to jobs and employers. ARI trains employees through competitive marketing and promotes social inclusion. Our services focus on strengthening the community by promoting a skilled workforce to drive economic growth through employment preparation and retention, occupational skills acquisition, career guidance and counseling, and career placement assistance.

Funding for our programs comes from a variety of sources including both private and government-funded grants, fundraising events, and individual contributions.

Cosumnes River College

[Cosumnes River College's](#) culture is built upon a foundation of respect, compassion, empathy, and shared decision-making. They value equity, inclusion, cultural humility, innovation, academic integrity, and sustainability. They embrace anti-racism and social justice for the communities they serve.

Cosumnes River College provides an innovative, equitable, and inclusive path for all students in diverse communities to achieve their educational, career, and personal goals. They promote the timely attainment of associate degrees, certificates, and transfer to other institutions and support the pursuit of individual enrichment and career aspirations. They uphold excellence in teaching and learning through diverse educational opportunities and effective student services.

La Familia Counseling Center

[La Familia's](#) mission is to improve the quality of life for at-risk youth and families of diverse backgrounds by offering multicultural counseling, support, and outreach services and programs to help families overcome adversity, become empowered, and succeed in their lives.

Serving the community is their top priority. They provide a range of services including classes, workshops, and special events around the year. Their exceptional programs are designed with you in mind. Kids, youth, adults, and families are always welcome.

No matter what your situation, they provide resources to help!

Sacramento City College

Since 1916, [Sacramento City College](#) has provided outstanding academic and vocational training to the Sacramento region. The college serves more than 20,000 students at:

- the Main Campus
- Davis Center
- West Sacramento Center
- online

For more than 100 years, Sacramento City College has remained committed to fostering a community that:

- celebrates diversity
- nurtures personal growth
- inspires academic and economic leadership

They place a high value on being an open-access institution—students enter as authentic human beings with their own cultures, abilities, experiences, and languages.

The California Emerging Technology Fund

[The California Emerging Technology Fund \(CETF\)](#) has been on a mission over the last decade to forge partnerships and foster public policy to close the Digital Divide. This work has been strategically focused, results-oriented, and people-centered. CETF has been guided by a Strategic Action Plan adopted by the Board of Directors in 2007 after reviewing existing research and gathering input statewide from community leaders about what works to advance Digital Inclusion. It was peer-reviewed by more than 60 stakeholders convened by the California Foundation on the Environment and Economy. It became clear through this fact-finding and listening process that the challenges were too great and the state was too big for CETF alone to get the job done—CETF had to become a “catalyst for action” by setting overarching goals for broadband deployment and adoption and then enlisting existing civic leaders and community organizations to help achieve them. They had to align efforts and leverage resources.

CETF catalyzed action through 5 Overall Strategies: (1) Civic Leader Engagement; (2) Venture Philanthropy Grantmaking; (3) Public Policy Initiatives; (4) Public Awareness and Education; and (5) Strategic Partnerships. These 5 Overall Strategies are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. They dedicated more than half of the seed capital to grants for non-profit organizations in 3 priority communities: rural and remote areas; urban disadvantaged neighborhoods; and people with disabilities. Their network of more than 100 grantees delivered digital literacy training to more than 800,000 residents and got more than 250,000 low-income households online. In addition, this network leveraged CETF grant funds 4-fold, documenting more than \$126 million in matching dollars. These community organizations

have emerged as a reservoir of expertise for getting all Californians online to participate in the Digital Economy.

CETF also advanced groundbreaking policies and launched pioneering initiatives: secured the Governor's Executive Order on Digital Literacy; designed and managed School2Home, scaling to 12 districts and 35 schools to serve more than 14,000 students and 600 teachers; founded and funded the California Telehealth Network; led several projects to connect residents in publicly subsidized complexes; and developed model policies for smart communities, including promoting broadband as a "green strategy" to reduce impacts on the environment. They pursued Strategic Partnerships with other institutions, such as collaborating with utilities to get their low-income customers online for energy efficiencies.

Once the Legislature and California Public Utilities Commission established the California Advanced Services Fund to support broadband infrastructure, CETF became the steady force to obtain sufficient funding and improve implementation, including sponsoring the Internet For All Now Act of 2017 to add \$330 million for broadband deployment and adoption. And, after years of trying to negotiate voluntary affordable broadband offers from providers, they reluctantly became a legal party in the regulatory arenas to secure tangible public benefits for broadband deployment and adoption from corporate consolidations. They are further pleased to report that they have operated with financial discipline: independent annual audits show that CETF cumulative expenditures over the decade are 94% Program and 6% Support. CETF has been a Catalyst for Action: **FOCUS; RESULTS; PEOPLE.**



Greater Sacramento Urban League

The [Greater Sacramento Urban League's](#) mission is to empower Black and other historically marginalized people throughout the region in securing economic self-reliance, educational fulfillment, social justice, and civil rights while living well, being well, and thriving.

Founded in 1910 and headquartered in New York City, [The National Urban League \(NUL\)](#) is one of the oldest civil rights organizations in the nation. NUL spearheads the efforts of its local affiliates through the development of programs, public policy research, and advocacy. Today, the National Urban League has 90 affiliates serving 300 communities in 37 states and the District of Columbia, providing direct services that impact and improve the lives of more than two million people nationwide. GSUL operates as one of the 90 affiliates across the Urban League Movement and routinely convenes and collaborates with NUL and other Urban League affiliates.

United Way California Capital Region

School is Square One for ending family poverty. Through their Square One approach, they are working to end poverty for local families starting in school. Currently, we are facing a housing crisis as well as deep roots of racial inequity. Through their Square One approach, they are committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion as they lay solid stepping stones to their path to help every family thrive.

[United Way California Capital Region](#) serves the counties of Amador, El Dorado, Placer, Sacramento, and Yolo. They are committed to helping families succeed, so their communities can too.

Valley Vision

Since its founding in 1994, [Valley Vision](#) has grown to become a deeply respected leader in understanding and addressing complex, systemic issues. They bring communities together to tackle our region's biggest challenges and ensure a more livable future. By creating common ground built on facts through trusted research and meaningful coalition-building, Valley Vision brings "community-inspired solutions" to the frontlines of a regional agenda for prosperity.





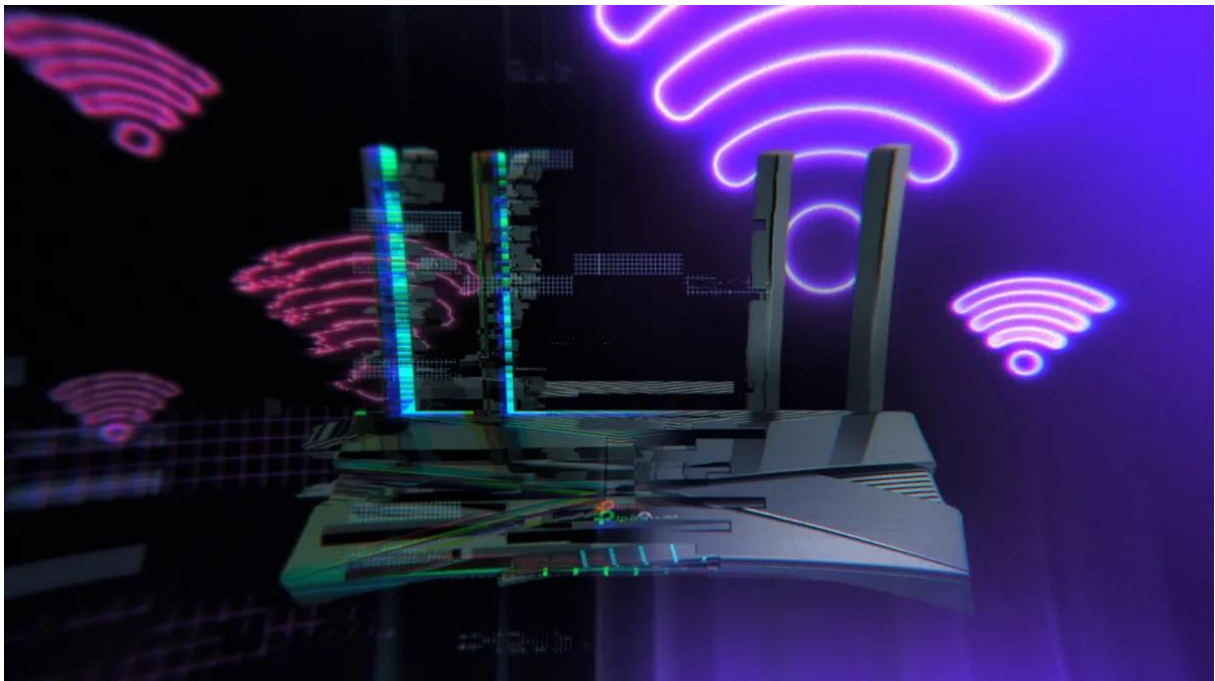
ACP Funding Drought: What You Need to Know and Alternative Options

The Affordable Connectivity Program is almost broke, and most recipients will receive only partial payments this month.

Joe Supan

May 4, 2024 5:30 a.m. PT

4 min read



Thanks to the ACP, more than 23 million households have been collectively saving almost \$700 million per month.

We're approaching the end of one of the largest investments in US history when it comes to closing the digital divide. Starting this month, recipients of benefits from the Affordable Connectivity Program will see their home internet bills increase by \$30 to \$75 per month.

In a little over two years, the program enrolled more than 23 million low-income households. Nearly half of ACP subscribers have been military families, according to a White House fact sheet. Seniors, African Americans and Latinos have also relied on the ACP at higher rates.

“It’s been the difference between choosing to have a roof over my head, whether to eat or whether to pay for the internet, which has things like virtual appointments with my psychiatrist,” Kenneth Sigler, a small-business owner from Hernando, Mississippi, who uses the ACP, told CNET. “It basically helps me to keep from having to choose what bills I’m going to pay.”

There is some hope that the program will be extended eventually — President Joe Biden in April called on lawmakers to extend the program, and several senators have continued to advocate for an extension — but for now, ACP subscribers will have to prepare for a world without the subsidy.

There’s no one resource that can replace the \$14.2 billion ACP, but there are a variety of local and state subsidies, nonprofits and discounted plans from providers that can help ease the transition.

Lifeline

Lifeline is a federal subsidy that provides \$9.25 per month to low-income households for home internet or cellphone plans. Its eligibility requirements are a little stricter than those of the ACP. Your income must be 135% or less than the Federal Poverty Guidelines, or \$40,500 for a family of four.

Lifeline income requirements

Household size	48 contiguous states, DC and territories	Alaska	Hawaii
1	\$19,683	\$24,584	\$22,640
2	\$26,622	\$33,264	\$30,618
3	\$33,561	\$41,945	\$38,597
4	\$40,500	\$50,625	\$46,575
5	\$47,439	\$59,306	\$54,554

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You can also get Lifeline if you (or someone who lives with you) participates in any of the following programs:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as Food Stamps)
- Medicaid
- Supplemental Security Income, or SSI
- Federal Public Housing Assistance, or FPHA
- Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit

If you live in [California](#), [Oregon](#) or [Texas](#), you must check with your internet provider or visit your state's website to apply for the program.

State and local resources

Some states and cities across the country offer their own local versions of the ACP to help low-income households pay for internet. [California](#), for example, has a website that allows you to search affordable options in your ZIP code based on various eligibility criteria, and [Oregon](#) provides an enhanced Lifeline benefit of \$19.25 monthly.

Cities like [Chicago](#) offer free internet to families in Chicago public schools and eligible city colleges through its [Chicago Connected program](#). The best way for you to find these resources is by going to Google and searching for “[location] internet resources.”

You can also check to see billion allocated in the Digital Equity Act to help close the digital divide.

Low-income programs from internet providers

Many internet providers have their own discounted plans available for low-income households, including [AT&T](#), [Spectrum](#) and [Xfinity](#). Requirements vary, but they're usually similar to the ACP: one must meet certain income requirements or participate in a federal program like SNAP or the National School Lunch Program.

Internet provider discounts

Program	Monthly price	Maximum speed
Access from AT&T	\$30	100Mbps
Astound Internet First	\$10	50Mbps
Cox Connect2Compete (for families)	\$10	100Mbps
Cox ConnectAssist (for individuals)	\$30	100Mbps
Mediacom Connect2Compete (for families)	\$10	25Mbps
Optimum Advantage	\$15	50Mbps
Spectrum Internet Assist	\$25	50Mbps
Verizon Forward	\$20-\$81	50-2,000Mbps
WOW! Internet Select 50 (for families)	\$10	50Mbps
Xfinity Internet Essentials	\$10	50Mbps

To determine which providers are available in your area, enter your address on the [Federal Communication Commission's broadband map](#).

Nonprofit organizations

There are a number of nonprofits around the country with the goal of closing the digital divide. Some help with monthly internet costs, while others provide devices that connect you to the internet. These organizations all received nonprofit status from the IRS and were vetted by watchdogs like [Charity Navigator](#) and [Guidestar.org](#):

- **Connect All**: Part of the InterConnection nonprofit, Connect All provides refurbished computers to low-income users. [Eligibility requirements](#) are similar to those of the ACP: Participation in federal programs like SNAP or SSI will automatically qualify you for devices.
- **EveryoneOn**: EveryoneOn is one of the most wide-ranging internet nonprofits out there. You can use its [locator tool](#) to find low-cost plans and computers in your area, enroll in [digital skills courses](#) and find local events that distribute devices.
- **Human-I-T**: This nonprofit accepts donations from corporations, refurbishes the devices and [sells them at a discount](#) to veterans, low-income households, seniors and other groups that qualify. It also offers [low-cost internet](#) through its mobile hotspot devices for less than \$30 per month.
- **Internet for All Now**: This is an initiative of the nonprofit California Emerging Technology Fund that helps Californians find low-cost plans in their area. People in California can call and speak with a trained expert, but the website has resources that anyone in the country can use.
- **National Digital Inclusion Alliance**: The NDIA is a well-known hub for research and policy aiming to close the digital divide, and while it doesn't offer low-cost internet itself, it's a helpful resource for navigating what's out there. You can also use this [map of NDIA affiliates providing broadband adoption services](#) to see what's available in your area.

Explore other internet plans in your area

If your bill's going up dramatically with the end of the ACP, another is to search for other internet providers in your area. Most ISPs offer plans under \$50 monthly, and you can often find additional discounts for things like bundling with a cellphone plan or signing an annual contract.

Purchasing your own equipment can also save you some extra money each month. It usually costs around \$15 to rent a modem and router from your internet provider, while you can buy your own for as little as \$100, especially if you go with refurbished equipment. That said, you'll need to ensure your modem is compatible with your provider before you purchase.

SFGATE

Millions Of Californians Weigh Options After Losing An Affordable Internet Subsidy

By Bay City News Service
April 28, 2024
By Khari Johnson
CalMatters

Alfredo Camacho and his three daughters started a new routine last week: Every evening they go to the parking lot outside a nearby library to get Wi-Fi access. The kids do homework and download YouTube videos, while Alfredo checks his email and searches job listings.

Camacho and his daughters ages 9, 12, and 15 live in Guadalupe, a town of roughly 9,000 on the Central Coast of California. They used to rely on the Affordable Connectivity Program, a \$30 to \$75 monthly credit for high-speed internet, but that ends this month.

"This takes away grocery money," he told CalMatters. "Being a single father, \$30 goes a long way."

Camacho is one of roughly three million Californians deciding whether to keep home internet access or give it up and deepen the digital divide.

Congress allocated \$14.2 billion to the Affordable Connectivity Program in 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic was still top of mind and underscored people's need for online access to do school and work. But since Congress failed to allocate more funding, that money runs out later this month. And since the subsidy only covers part of the bill, the onus is on subsidy recipients to cut the cord or it could end up costing them money.

Nationwide, more than 23 million Americans benefited from the program. An additional 30 million eligible people never received the subsidy.

Four out of five households enrolled in the program cite affordability as the reason why they had inconsistent or no internet access, according to a Federal Communications Commission

survey released two months ago. Roughly the same amount said the end of the subsidy will force them to find cheaper service or get rid of home internet service.

The Federal Communications Commission, which stopped accepting affordable internet applications in February, said internet service providers are required to inform recipients three times before charging consumers full price, with the final notification this month, the last billing cycle that includes a full subsidy. The federal agency said some people may receive partial affordable internet funding in May. People who haven't received such notifications yet are encouraged to call their internet service provider.

In a letter urging leaders in Congress to pass a law extending funding last month, more than 150 members of Congress note that roughly half of Affordable Connectivity Program recipients are military families, one in four live in rural communities, and one in five are households with people who are 65 or older. The letter called internet service essential to education, health, and the economy, and warned that ending the program could reduce trust in government and internet service providers.

Camacho agrees that ending the program breaks public trust. "You gave everybody hope and then you dropped the ball," he said.

'Things are going to get worse'

Winnie Aguilar lives in senior housing in Imperial Beach and called the affordable internet subsidy important to her and many of her neighbors.

"For us who have very low income and cannot work anymore it's hard to lose that \$30," she said.

The digital divide for students from poor families and rural areas can and should end, said Mary Nicely, the California Department of Education chief deputy superintendent of public instruction. "Our students and families deserve a greater investment, not less, to ensure they have a level playing field to succeed academically," she wrote in a statement. "We have a long way to go to ensure that all students in this state have the resources they need to thrive academically."

State officials offered no estimates for the number of students affected by the end of the Affordable Connectivity Program.

The pandemic led to the development of many online tools that still get used, Public Policy Institute of California researcher Joe Hayes told CalMatters. "So it stands to reason that households from historically underserved populations are going to be harder hit by the disappearance of the Affordable Connectivity Program," he said.

A record 95% of Californians have access to the internet today, according to a report Hayes published earlier this month. In recent years, access has increased the most among low-income Black and Latino households headed by people who didn't graduate from college, the

report said. The digital divide has narrowed for grade-school students as well, but still persists, the institute found in February.

Despite years of progress that made him optimistic, Hayes expects the end of the Affordable Connectivity Program to widen the digital divide for students and low-income households.

"Things are going to get worse for people on the margins," he told CalMatters. "Even if you're in a place with fiber in the ground, if you suddenly can't afford it, I do expect that that gap to widen."

Still, Hayes notes that a number of federal programs continue to fund efforts to end the digital divide, including the Department of Treasury's coronavirus projects fund and the broadband equity and access deployment program. There's also a \$6 billion state program to fund broadband infrastructure projects, and earlier this month the state of California received a \$70 million federal grant to implement a digital equity plan. But he said these programs don't address a key issue at the heart of the matter: high monthly costs charged by internet service providers.

The average cost of home internet is \$83 a month, according to a 2023 survey by the California Department Of Technology. Latino households, people who live in rural areas, and low-income households are amongst those most in need of internet service, said the survey released in summer 2023. Roughly 3.5 million Californians still lack internet access due to lack of infrastructure, affordability, or other issues, according to the survey.

Sunne McPeak works to end the digital divide as the president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund, which is informing people who received Affordable Connectivity Program money about low-cost options available from internet service providers.

She said there are two important next steps for California to close the digital divide despite the end of the program:

- The Federal Communications Commission needs to keep sharing data with state agencies that administer federal assistance programs like Medi-Cal; groups attempting to bridge the digital divide use this data to reach households

- Do as AB 1588 and SB 1179 propose and require internet service providers extend affordable offers to people who were eligible for the Affordable Connectivity Program. She said companies like AT&T, Comcast, Cox, and Frontier already do so.

"It's a total political problem," McPeak said about the digital divide. "They could solve it tomorrow with the right will."