How To Get Government-Backed Discounts for High-Speed Internet

Temporary program will make available $3.2 billion to cut the cost of getting connected

by John Waggoner, AARP, Updated May 13, 2021 | Comments: 16

En español | The just-launched Emergency Broadband Benefit program (EBB) is making $3.2 billion available for people with low incomes or whose income declined substantially during the coronavirus pandemic.

The program, which was part of the third stimulus bill, is designed to help a wide swath of all Americans get online, but the money is limited. As of May 12, you can register for assistance at GetEmergencyBroadband.org. You also can contact an internet provider for assistance or sign up by mail. To learn more or get a mail-in application, call 833-511-0311.

“As part of the new Emergency Broadband Benefit, millions of Americans are now eligible to receive substantial discounts on broadband service and computers,” Jessica Rosenworcel, acting chairwoman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), said in a statement.
About 14 million Americans — and 22 percent of those 65 and older — don't have access to a high-speed internet connection, the FCC estimates. Other estimates say as many as 42 million in the U.S. are on the wrong side of the “digital divide.”

And many people have struggled to stay online during the pandemic, either because of low incomes or because of long stretches of unemployment. Because of high demand, if you are eligible for the EBB program, you should apply soon.

AARP has long worked for low-cost internet solutions for older Americans, who need high-speed broadband for teleworking, medical and health-related information and news, online health-care consultations with doctors and nurses, and interacting with loved ones and friends, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The Emergency Broadband Benefit will help older adults get and stay connected to the internet during the pandemic, and it can provide a road map for more long-lasting policies,” says Dawit Kahsai, AARP senior legislative representative.

If you’re on the wrong side of the digital divide — or know someone who is — AARP can help you reduce the cost of getting connected, learn what the Emergency Broadband Benefit program can do for you, and guide you in signing up.

What's the benefit?

The program will give a discount of up to $50 a month toward high-speed internet service for eligible households and up to $75 a month for households on Native American tribal lands.

What you can do now

In addition to the Emergency Broadband Benefit program, if your income is low, apply for the existing federal Lifeline program, which offers less of a discount. However, its benefits will last beyond the stimulus.

Lifeline. A printable form also is available after selecting your state, nationalverifier.servicenowservices.com/lifeline

Check providers in your area

- Federal Communications Commission, fcc.gov/emergency-broadband-benefit-providers
- Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) from AARP through its AgingConnected service, agingconnected.org
The program will end when the money is spent or six months after the Department of Health and Human Services declares the end of federal emergency surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. Internet providers will have to notify participants about the last date of the discount or partial discount, when the federal money runs out, to help with a potential transition to another program. The FCC does not know, yet, how long the $3.2 billion will last.

Eligible households also can receive a onetime discount of up to $100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer or tablet from participating providers if the consumer contributes $10 to $50 toward the purchase price.

"This is a program that will help those at risk of digital disconnection," acting FCC Chair Jessica Rosenworcel said in a statement. “It will help those sitting in cars in parking lots, just to catch a Wi-Fi signal, to go online for work. It will help those who worry about choosing between paying a broadband bill and paying rent, buying medicine or groceries.”

Who is eligible?

- **People who experienced a substantial loss of income** because of job loss or furlough since February 29, 2020, and the household had a total income in 2020 at or below $99,000 for single filers and $198,000 for joint filers.

- **People who use the federal Lifeline discount program.** Lifeline offers up to a $9.25 discount off monthly phone or internet bills to households that make less than 135 percent of the federal poverty guideline or have at least one family member in some public assistance program such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). For a family of four to qualify based on 135 percent of the federal poverty guidelines, annual income would need to come in below $35,775. The Tribal Link Up program provides additional discounts for those who live on Native American lands.

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• **EveryoneOn**, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, everyoneon.org/find-offers

Need help figuring it out?

**Universal Service Administrative Co.**, which operates the Lifeline fund created from a tax on phone service, has a toll-free information number for the EBB program, 833-511-0311

Ready to learn?

**Senior Planet** from AARP has free classes for anyone who wants to learn the basics after getting online, seniorplanet.org/aging-connected

Seek other help

• **AARP Foundation** offers programs and services to help older adults secure jobs, benefits, refunds and social connections, aarp.org/aarp-foundation

• **Connect2Affect** from AARP Foundation can help you combat social isolation, connect2affect.org

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People who already use a discounted internet service from a high-speed internet provider that is aimed at low-income households. AT&T, for example, offers internet access for $10 or less a month for households in which at least one person participates in the government’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Cox offers internet service for $9.95 a month for new customers with at least one K-12 student in the household who qualifies for public assistance.

Households whose children get free or low-cost school meals also will be eligible for the monthly discount of up to $50, as will people who have lost their jobs or had their income reduced in the past year.

Households living on tribal Native American lands will be eligible for a higher internet discount of up to $75 a month, generally because high-speed internet in these areas is more expensive. The program also will offer a onetime discount of up to $100 for the purchase of a computer or tablet for those who are eligible, as long as consumers contribute $10 to $50 toward the purchase price. Those who get the benefits from the Lifeline Tribal Link Up discount program will be eligible to get EBB benefits as well.

College students who receive student aid in the form of federal Pell grants.

You may qualify

The income limit increases with the number of people living in the same household. Others who have experienced a substantial loss of income since the pandemic started in 2020 may also qualify.

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Source: Federal Communications Commission, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

This story, originally published March 2, 2021, was updated to reflect developments in the Emergency Broadband Benefit program.

John Waggoner covers all things financial for AARP, from budgeting and taxes to retirement planning and Social Security. Previously he was a reporter for Kiplinger’s Personal Finance and USA Today and has written books on investing and the 1998 financial crisis. Waggoner’s USA Today investing column ran in dozens of newspapers for 25 years.

More on Personal Technology

- Older adults wary about their privacy online. Being aware of pitfalls can help
- Programs can help older adults get or upgrade computers, internet access
- AARP joins with nonprofit to teach tech to older adults