

Lifeline Program: What Consumers Should Know

What is the Lifeline Program?

The Lifeline Program is a government benefit program that provides eligible low-income consumers a monthly discount on telephone service to help them stay connected to the nation's communications networks, find jobs, access healthcare services, and call for help in an emergency. Recognizing the changes in the way we communicate in today's technological climate, the Lifeline Program has expanded its service offerings to include, where available, a monthly discount on internet service. We hope this expansion of the Lifeline Program will further help connect low-income families to the internet, closing the "homework gap," and eliminating the distance to meaningful employment and reliable healthcare.

What Benefits are Available through the Lifeline Program?

The Lifeline Program provides a discount on one communications service from a certified Lifeline Program service provider. Currently, Lifeline subscribers have the choice—where available—of applying their benefit discount to one of the following types of service offerings:

- Home or wireless phone service; or
- Home internet or a wireless phone data plan.

Some Lifeline service providers may offer a bundled package of home or wireless phone service with internet access; however, only the service that the Lifeline benefit discount is applied to must meet the minimum standard.

In addition, minimum service standards have been established to make sure supported services keep pace with the ever-changing digital landscape. These service standards will be evaluated each year to ensure the continued support of robust and meaningful internet connectivity.

The chart below outlines the minimum service standards effective as of December 1, 2018:

Mobile Voice	Mobile Internet	Fixed Internet
Usage Allowance: 1,000 Minutes	Usage Allowance: 2 GB Speed: 3G	Usage Allowance: 1000 GB Speed: 18/2 Mbps

Who is Eligible for the Lifeline Program?

There are two ways to qualify for the Lifeline Program: income-based eligibility or program-based eligibility

Income-Based Eligibility

A household is eligible for Lifeline service if its total household income is at or below 135% of the federal poverty guidelines, which vary depending on the size of the household. The definition of a "household" is anyone living at an address (including children, relatives, people not related to you, etc.) who share income and household expenses.

For 2018, the following income amounts represent 135% of the federal poverty guidelines:

Persons in Household	Annual Income
1	\$16,389
2	\$22,221
3	\$28,053
4	\$33,885
5	\$39,717
6	\$45,549
7	\$51,381
8	\$57,213
For each additional person, add	\$5,832

Each year the income-eligibility requirements for the Lifeline Program may change. You may be required to complete the provider's household worksheet to help determine your household's total income

Program-Based Eligibility

A household is eligible for Lifeline service if a member participates in one of the following federal assistance programs:

- Medicaid (MassHealth)
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps)
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Federal Public Housing Assistance (Section 8)
- Certain Federally-Recognized/State Tribal Assistance Programs
- Veteran's Pension or Survivor's Pension benefit

Please Note: As of December 2, 2016, applicants can no longer use the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to prove their eligibility for Lifeline.

Which Service Providers Participate in the Lifeline Program?

The following providers offer home phone service:

- **Verizon**
Call 1-800-837-4966 or visit www.verizon.com/lifeline
- **OTELCO (formerly Granby Telephone Company)**
Call 1-866-746-3873 or visit <https://www.otelco.com/lifeline-information/>
- **Magna5 (formerly Richmond Telephone Company)**
Call 1-866-240-1912 or visit <http://www.richmondtelephone.com/info.htm>
- **Consolidated Communications (formerly Taconic Telephone)**
Call 1-866-984-2001 or visit <https://www.consolidated.com/support/residential-support/lifeline-assistance-programs>

The following providers offer wireless phone service:

- **Assurance Wireless (supported by Virgin Mobile USA and Sprint)***
Call 1-888-898-4888 or visit www.assurancewireless.com
- **Safelink Wireless (supported by TracFone Wireless)***
Call 1-800-723-3546 or visit www.safelinkwireless.com
- **StandUP Wireless (supported by Global Connection)***
Call 1-800-544-4441 or visit www.standupwireless.com

**Provider currently offers internet access by means of a wireless data plan or a bundled package of wireless phone service and a data plan. Provider must have at least one mobile device with hotspot functionality available for data plans.*

Before you start the application process, you may wish to contact each certified Lifeline service provider in your area to learn about their Lifeline service offerings in order to determine which service will meet your household's needs. You may be able to complete a provider's application process online, by telephone, or by mail. You must submit proof of eligibility documentation with your application.

Federal rules require that all Lifeline service providers securely retain copies of your eligibility documentation received during program enrollment for dispute resolution purposes as long as your Lifeline benefit is active.

Will I be required to recertify my eligibility?

Yes, each year you must certify that you are still eligible to receive the Lifeline Program benefit and that no one else in your household is receiving a Lifeline Program benefit.

Once a year, typically before the anniversary date of your enrollment in the Lifeline Program with your provider, you will be contacted by your Lifeline provider or the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC) with instructions on how to complete the recertification process. You must respond to this request within 60 days.

If you do not complete this recertification process, you will lose your Lifeline benefit. This means your monthly bill may increase, or the services you normally receive for free each month will not be provided.

If your Lifeline provider determines that you are no longer eligible for the Lifeline benefit, it will notify you of such and your Lifeline service will be terminated in 30 days, unless you provide proof of eligibility.

If you become ineligible for the Lifeline benefit at any time, *you must contact your Lifeline provider within 30 days to de-enroll* from the program or you may be subject to penalties.

Accessible Devices

For consumers who require an accessible device, there are options available.

To apply for financial assistance in obtaining a handset compatible with your landline telephone service provider, you may contact the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Assistive Technology Fund at 617-740-1600, or Alexander Pooler, the Director of the Assistive Technology Program at the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, by email at Alexander.Pooler@state.ma.us.

To request an accessible wireless device, contact your wireless carrier of choice to explore what models are available to suit your needs. Braille key, larger-screen, and hearing aid-compatible mobile phones may also be available upon request.

Important Consumer Tips

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- Effective March 19, 2018, the Lifeline Program's benefit port freeze rule was eliminated. The rule first went into effect on December 2, 2016, and it required Lifeline subscribers to remain with their service provider for at least 60 days (for voice service) or 12 months (for broadband service) after initiating service to continue receiving the Lifeline benefit.
- A subscriber with free Lifeline service must use the service at least once every 30 days or they will be de-enrolled from the program. For Lifeline wireless subscribers, sending a text message qualifies as usage of service.
- Applicants will be required to complete an application for their service provider of choice that certifies they meet the program's eligibility requirements. This will also include submitting acceptable proof of eligibility documentation.
- Prior to submitting a Lifeline application to a service provider, be sure all questions are completed and answers are legible. Provide a photocopy of your proof of eligibility document(s) and keep a copy of the completed application.
- Applicants must recertify that they continue to meet the Lifeline Program's eligibility requirements each year or they will lose their Lifeline service. Failing to respond to a recertification request from your Lifeline provider or the Universal Administrative Company (USAC) will result in a removal of your Lifeline benefit discount or a loss of service. A new application with proof of eligibility documentation will need to be submitted in order to re-enroll in the program.
- Enrolling in the Lifeline Program does not protect a subscriber from being disconnected if they fail to pay their telephone bill.
- Depending on a subscriber's location, some wireless carriers may provide a better signal than others. Applicants should contact each participating company to find out which provides the most coverage in their area prior to selecting a provider.
- If an existing Lifeline subscriber is interested in switching their Lifeline service to a plan including a wireless data plan, they may be required to purchase their own smartphone that is compatible with the Lifeline provider's network. Check with your provider for additional details.
- The Lifeline benefit does not cover the cost of the replacement of a lost, broken or stolen mobile device. Mobile device replacements are determined by a Lifeline provider's own policy

We are here to Help!

For additional information regarding the Lifeline program, contact the Consumer Division of the Massachusetts Department of Telecommunications and Cable. The Consumer Division also accepts complaints concerning Lifeline service and works directly with Lifeline service providers to resolve any issues that subscribers may encounter.

Visit or Write: Consumer Division, Department of Telecommunications and Cable, 1000 Washington Street, Suite 820, Boston, MA 02118

IVORY

Call: 1-800-392-6066 (Our Consumer Hotline operates Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm)

Fax: 617-988-8288

Email: consumer.complaints@mass.gov

Web: www.mass.gov/dtc

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<https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2019/01/10/2019%20English%20DTC%20Lifeline%20Program%20Guide.pdf>