

Lifeline: Keeping Americans Connected During and After a Natural Disaster

Natural disasters like the wildfires in California, Hurricane Harvey in Texas and the Southeast, and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands wreak havoc on the communications and power grid. When disaster strikes, the Federal Communications Commission often allocates resources to help restore the communications infrastructure. But once service is fully restored, affordability remains an issue for low-income consumers further cash-strapped during disaster recovery. That is why the [Lifeline program](#) is a vital complement to restoration of communications infrastructure.

Lifeline is a federal program created in 1985 that helps low-income Americans in every state and U.S. territory afford voice and broadband service. The program proved its worth to disaster survivors after it was expanded to better serve those displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. However, the FCC's recent proposals stand in sharp contrast to the Commission's efforts to assist hurricane victims after Katrina over a decade ago. A current suite of proposed changes would drastically reduce the number of eligible service providers and limit the reach of Lifeline, risking further disruption of services to [America's 13 million Lifeline households](#) at a time when connectivity may be a matter of life and death.

Lifeline helps disaster survivors connect with loved ones.

Not knowing whether a loved one is safe and well can be the most heart-wrenching aspect of disaster recovery. Affordable voice services allowed families in the path of Hurricane Harvey to call each other and stay informed of their health and safety. Disaster survivors are also using broadband to connect with their families and [emergency services via social media](#).



The Lifeline program allows low-income Californians to stay up-to-date on fast-moving wildfires. Through the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, residents can receive county-by-county alerts via text message or email providing updates on the wildfires path and delivering evacuation orders and instructions. Post-disaster, Californians with voice and broadband service are able to connect to [financial assistance](#), temporary housing services, rebuilding programs, debris removal, and low-cost legal services.

With affordable broadband services, telemedicine can help save lives. Telemedicine is on the rise and depends heavily on a reliable connection to the internet. [Between 2011 and 2016, telehealth usage increased by 960 percent](#) in rural areas, but Hurricane Maria marked one of the first times the technology was used in a disaster relief situation. Using broadband, the NewYork-Presbyterian hospital [connected Puerto Ricans with specialists at Cornell and Columbia University's Medical Centers](#). As the island continues to rebuild, patients with affordable broadband internet access can use telemedicine to address ongoing medical needs at home.



Rationing Lifeline benefits and limiting service providers will increase costs and disrupt access for survivors of natural disasters. The FCC must keep the Lifeline program's focus on people struggling to rebuild their homes and their lives after a natural disaster.