

Lifeline: Keeping Puerto Ricans Connected After a Natural Disaster

In 2017, Hurricane Maria wreaked havoc on the Puerto Rico's communications and power grid. As was the case in previous natural disasters, like Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina, the Federal Communications Commission allocated 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.

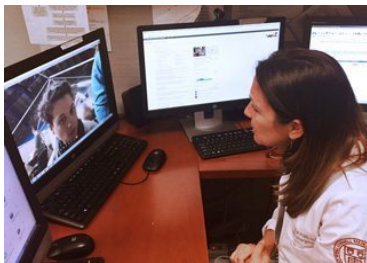
Lifeline is a federal program created in 1985 that helps low-income Americans in every state and U.S. territory afford voice and broadband service. The program proved its worth to disaster survivors after it was expanded to better serve those displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. However, the FCC's recent proposals stand in sharp contrast to the Commission's efforts to assist hurricane victims after Katrina over a decade ago. The current suite of proposals would drastically reduce the number of eligible service providers and limit the reach of Lifeline, risking further disruption of services to [Puerto Rico's 500,000+ Lifeline households](#) at a time when connectivity can be a matter of life and death.



The Lifeline program connects low-income disaster survivors with programs that can help. In the months after Hurricane Maria, the U.S. Military, Red Cross, Salvation Army, United Way, and other nonprofit organizations were on the ground in Puerto Rico providing temporary roofing, shelter, food, and clean water to survivors still piecing their lives back together. Access to [these resources](#) post-disaster, as well as to distress helplines and low-income legal services, is made possible by affordable phone and internet services, particularly for Puerto Ricans in rural communities.

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 and broadband services allow disaster-impacted families to keep each other informed of their health and the condition of their living situations.



Telemedicine can be life-saving with affordable broadband services. 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.