

Memorandum

To: ADvancing States Members

From: Damon Terzaghi & Adam Mosey, ADvancing States

Re: Federal Communications Commission Emergency Broadband Benefit Program

Date: April 9, 2021

Background

In December 2020, Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, which contained a significant amount of COVID relief funding in addition to the FY2021 annual appropriations. For a summary of the legislation, visit:

<http://www.advancingstates.org/policy/federal-advocacy/advocacy-alerts/advancing-states-releases-analysis-fy2021-appropriations-and>

The law created a new program that subsidizes broadband internet access as well as devices for certain households. This program is administered by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and is called the “Emergency Broadband Benefit Program.” We believe that this program could be extremely useful to individuals served by Aging and Disability programs and wanted to make sure that state agencies and their partners are aware of the benefit and the status of the program.

Program Overview

The program will be implemented by local internet service providers (ISPs) with FCC oversight and administration. This means that, although it is a Federal benefit, eligible individuals must apply for the program through a participating ISP. A list of participating ISPs organized by state is available online at: <https://www.fcc.gov/emergency-broadband-benefit-providers>

The benefit provides a \$50 monthly credit for broadband internet (\$75 on tribal lands) for households that meet one of the following criteria:

- Qualifies for the Lifeline program, which includes households under 135% FPL or that participate in any of:
 - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program;
 - Medicaid;

- Supplemental Security Income;
- Federal Public Housing Assistance;
- Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit; or
- Tribal Programs (and live on federally-recognized Tribal lands).
- Receives benefits under the free and reduced-price school lunch program or the school breakfast program, including through the USDA Community Eligibility Provision, or did so in the 2019-2020 school year;
- Received a Federal Pell Grant during the current award year;
- Experienced a substantial loss of income since February 29, 2020 and the household had a total income in 2020 below \$99,000 for single filers and \$198,000 for joint filers; or
- Meets the eligibility criteria for a participating providers' existing low-income or COVID-19 program.

Participants will need to pay for any plan costs that exceed the \$50 credit (or \$75 on tribal lands). Households can also receive a one-time benefit of \$100 towards the purchase of an internet-capable device, such as a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet provided that they contribute between \$10-\$50 toward the purchase price. The subsidy does not support purchase of smartphones or table devices with cellular capability.

Current Status

FCC is in the process of implementing the benefit, but the exact start date of the program is not yet determined. FCC states that they expect to make the benefit available by the end of April 2021. In the meantime, FCC has been engaged in a number of outreach activities. Resources that may assist you and your networks educate and enroll eligible individuals include:

- The opportunity to become an “outreach partner” by registering on: <https://www.fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit>
- FCC educational materials developed for program participants: <https://www.fcc.gov/consumer-faq-emergency-broadband-benefit>
- An upcoming FCC & Administration for Community Living webinar on Thursday, April 15, 2021, 3:00 PM eastern time. Registration is available at: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_3DWPQ9R6T-uHR6tvdqA4Ug

Additional information is available at the program’s website, online at:

<https://www.fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit>

Unfortunately, the FCC does not have an estimate for the exact length of time that the benefit will be available. The legislation provided \$3.2 billion for the program and the benefit will end either when the funding is exhausted or at the end of the pandemic, whichever comes first. Depending upon the number of households that enroll in the broadband benefit, the appropriations may be exhausted before the pandemic ends. If the program runs out of money, some individuals may only receive a partial subsidy during their ISPs billing cycle. Although FCC guidance mandates that ISPs must receive an individual's permission before increasing the out-of-pocket costs due to funding exhaustion, it is unclear how the ISPs are expected to manage transitioning from subsidized internet in the middle of a billing cycle. After program expiration, individuals would need to proactively enroll in a full-cost service plan to maintain broadband access.

State Agency Considerations

The process for individuals to enroll may be somewhat confusing given the implementation through local ISPs. State Agencies can assist by providing education, outreach, and training to appropriate staff, such as Information and Referral/Assistance professionals, case managers, employees at Area Agencies on Aging, Centers for Independent Living, and ADRCs, on the program. This information can include the advantages and limitations of the available subsidies, the potential costs to individuals, and ways to access the benefit.

Broadband connectivity is not the only barrier to internet access for some individuals as many older adults do not have sufficient internet "literacy" to utilize many of the opportunities that a broadband connection provides.¹ It would therefore be valuable to engage with partners, such as State Assistive Technology programs, to support education, outreach, and training that can assist older adults and persons with disabilities utilize the internet effectively and holistically.

State agencies can also engage with local ISPs to collaborate on the program using the list of providers linked earlier in this report. Such engagement could help facilitate access and enrollment into the benefit as well as help participants understand the ISPs' offerings and

¹ A Double Burden of Exclusion? Digital and Social Exclusion of Older Adults in Times of COVID-19: J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci, 2021, Vol. 76, No. 3, e99–e103; doi:10.1093/geronb/gbaa098

associated out-of-pocket costs. Ongoing communication and collaboration could also provide an opportunity for states to proactively address any issues that could occur from program expiration and assist enrolled households understand their options when transitioning from the subsidy.

Conclusion

Challenges with broadband access have continued to limit the ability of many older adults and people with disabilities to access telemedicine, social and medical supports, socialization, and many other important opportunities that the internet provides.² This lack of access to the internet and resulting impacts have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Emergency Broadband Benefit could greatly assist many of the individuals that state aging and disability agencies serve. However, despite the financial subsidy, there could be out-of-pocket costs for individuals and households that participate in the program. State agencies can support these individuals by ensuring that they have necessary information to make informed choices about participation and ISP plan selection.

² Ibid