

BUSINESS

Free broadband available to many in state

A federal subsidy will cover much or all of the cost. Here's what you need to know.

By JON HEALEY

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted just how important it is to have a broadband internet connection at home — for remote school or work, virtual doctor's exams and meetings, and many other pursuits. But broadband can be costly, so the federal government offered new subsidies to help low-income households afford a high-speed line and a device with which to use it.

Dozens of internet service providers all across California have signed up for the program, which covers as much as \$50 of the monthly cost of an internet connection (or up to \$75 on tribal lands). The program also authorizes a one-time \$100 discount on a computer or other device.

The new benefit is a major upgrade over the Federal Communication Commission's Lifeline program, which provides only \$9.25 a month. The average cost of the most popular broadband connection is \$48 a month, according to the broadband trade association, USTelecom.

But while the subsidies have been generous and widely available, they don't appear to have brought many more people online.

As of Sunday, 732,201 households in the state had enrolled in the program, according to the FCC. As large as that number may seem, it's only about 20% of the households that are likely to be eligible. And Sunne Wright McPeak, chief executive of the California Emerging Technology Fund, said the bulk of the Californians who have signed up appear to be people who already had broadband through the internet service providers' discount programs for low-income residents — not people with no access to the in-



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

ONLY ABOUT 20% of eligible households have enrolled in the Emergency Broadband Benefit, possibly because many don't know about it. Above, a parent receives a computer at a Lynwood elementary school in 2020.

ternet.

The problem, McPeak said, is that eligible Californians don't know about the program, "and nobody is telling them."

John Horrigan, a senior fellow at the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, said a new survey of low- and lower-moderate-income households found that only 25% had heard of the Emergency Broadband Benefit. One reason, he said, is that the government provided no funding to publicize the program and reach out to prospective users.

Internet service providers say they're promoting the new subsidies on their websites and through social media. People who have little or no access to the internet, however, aren't likely to see those messages.

If you would like a broadband connection but can't afford one, here's how to apply for the Emergency Broadband Benefit. If you

already have broadband but know someone who doesn't, pass this information along. Better yet, help them fill out the application.

Who qualifies?

The FCC's website lays out a number of ways to qualify based on your income or COVID-19-related hardship:

- Your household income is no more than 135% of the federal poverty level. In California and most other states, that translates to about \$17,400 per year for a single individual or \$35,800 for a family of four.

- You or a dependent are enrolled in at least one of the major federal safety net programs, including food stamps, Medi-Cal or tribal assistance.

- You earned as much as \$99,000 as an individual or \$198,000 as a couple, but your household lost substantial income during the pandemic because of a layoff or

furlough.

- A member of your household received a federal Pell Grant for college in the current award year or qualified for reduced-price school lunches in the current or two previous school years.

- Your household is eligible for an internet service provider's discounted broadband service.

Each household can obtain only one discounted broadband line, however.

How do you sign up?

According to the FCC, participants in the Lifeline program can apply for the Emergency Broadband Benefit through their internet provider. The same may be true for people enrolled in an internet provider's discounted broadband plan.

For everyone else, the first step is to go online to apply for benefits or to get a copy of an application to mail to the FCC. The application will ask you to

provide some identifying information (e.g., your Social Security or driver's license number), attest to your household size and income level, and indicate whether you suffered a COVID-19-related income loss or are enrolled in certain federal safety net programs. You'll also need to back up your application with documents, such as a statement of benefits or a tax return.

Once you've been approved for the subsidies, you'll need to find an internet provider that's participating in the program. The FCC website has a list that you can search by ZIP Code or city. From there, you'll need to call the internet provider and sign up. Different companies impose different fees and restrictions (such as monthly data caps) on their broadband accounts, so be sure to compare the offerings from local phone, cable TV and wireless compa-

nies.

The FCC won't tell you which companies are also providing discounted computers, tablets or other devices you could use to browse the internet. McPeak said none of the major internet providers in California are doing so. A number of carriers are instead applying part of the monthly discount to the fee they charge for modems or routers.

Once you've gotten approved and signed up for service, the government will pay the subsidies directly to your broadband provider.

When will it end?

The federal government launched the Emergency Broadband Benefit in May, intending to run the program until the \$3.1 billion provided by Congress ran out. So far, \$600 million has been claimed; with about 6 million households participating, it would take roughly eight months to spend the remaining \$2.5 billion if no one else signed up.

Congress may give the program a longer runway, however, while also reducing the subsidy amount. The bipartisan infrastructure bill awaiting final action in the House includes \$14.2 billion for the effort, which would be renamed the Affordable Connectivity Program and allowed to continue indefinitely.

The subsidy would be reduced to \$30 a month, but internet providers would be required to let you apply the subsidy to any tier of service — potentially opening up lower-cost offerings to you.

Internet providers would also be required to collaborate with nonprofits and public interest groups on public awareness campaigns to increase participation by people who don't already have broadband. McPeak said that enlisting the help of trusted members of the community is key to closing the digital divide. And Horrigan said research shows that "low-income households trust internet service providers less than libraries or nonprofits."