



Affordable Telephone and Internet and Protections from Service Terminations During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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What is Telecommunication?

- Communication over a distance by cable, telegraph, telephone, or broadcast
 - Includes cell phones, landline telephones, cable telephones, internet (DSL and broadband)
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has jurisdiction over all interstate and foreign communications by wired and wireless systems
- In New York, the Department of Public Service regulates telecommunications (landline and cable telephone)
 - *Not* cellular telephone services or Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)

NYS Targeted Accessibility Fund (TAF)

- Applies to both wireless and wireline telephone companies
- Provides:
 - State-level funding for Lifeline to supplement federal funding
 - Subsidies for rural and "high-cost" phone service
- PULP Chairs the TAF currently

Lifeline

- Started in 1985 at the FCC to offer discounted phone service to low-income individuals
 - In 2005, Hurricane Katrina's destruction created a need for wireless lifeline, which vastly enlarged the number of recipients
- In 2016, the FCC ordered changes to Lifeline that affected
 - Eligibility
 - State criteria ended, other criteria ended; annual certification process "federalized"
 - A focus on cost containment began shifting the program for "need-based"
 - The federal subsidy of \$9.25 per month began lowering in 2019; it is \$7.25 now, \$5.25 for 2021 and \$0 afterward
- For wireless, voice requirements increased as did data; currently 1000 minutes of voice and 3gb of 3G speeds (2015 data speeds)

Lifeline (NYS)

- In New York, applies to:
 - Home phone
 - Landlines and Spectrum (fka Time Warner Cable) only
 - Cell phone service (not currently covered by New York's added subsidy under TAF)
 - Internet
- Only one discount per household
- Broadband providers frequently upsell to "bundles" which eliminates Lifeline discounts

LifeLine Eligibility

- Income at or below 135% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines
- Receipt of:
 - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
 - Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
 - Medicaid
 - Federal Public Housing Assistance
 - Tribal-specific programs (Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance, Tribally-Administered Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TTANF), Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), Head Start)

Apply for LifeLine

- If you are eligible based on income or federal program participation:
 - Apply through the National Eligibility Verifier
 - <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/national-verifier/>

Low-Income Internet Programs from Spectrum, Altice, Verizon (via FiOS)

- Established in 2017 as a condition of Altice's (fka Cablevision) and Spectrum's (fka Time Warner) mergers
- Must be a new internet customer and not owe back arrears
- Eligibility varies by internet provider
 - For cable, seniors receiving SSI are eligible, and families with eligibility under the National School Lunch Program (either individual receipt or Community Eligibility Provision)
- Contact your internet provider directly to see if you're eligible

Changes During COVID-19

- The FCC has temporarily eased its new restrictions on Lifeline;
- **This means that through November 30:**
 - Involuntary de-enrollments of existing subscribers should not occur.
 - There will be no new Lifeline Program integrity reviews announced.
 - Recertification is now on hold for subscribers with anniversary dates between April 14, 2020, and February 28, 2021.
- FCC's Keep America Connected voluntary pledge ended on July 31, 2020

Changes During COVID-19 (NYS)

- June 17, 2020 Moratorium law signed by Governor Cuomo
 - The law prevents (water, telephone, gas and electric) utility companies from terminating service to residential customers during the pandemic; added municipals
 - Does *not* include internet; telephone and internet were briefly “voluntarily” covered under the federal Keep America Connected pledge, which ended on July 31, 2020
 - Altice/Optimum and Spectrum and Verizon have recently announced restarts of their low-income internet packages, but retaining prior barriers to eligibility that exclude many New Yorkers and any that owe arrears; some debt forgiveness and DPA expansion

Termination Moratorium Protections

- The moratorium on service terminations will either end: 180 days after the State of Emergency is lifted on October 4, 2020 or on March 31, 2021 (whichever date comes sooner)
 - Customers should self-certify with their telephone provider that they have been impacted by COVID-19 in order to take advantage of the moratorium and Safe Harbor provisions
- Note that the Moratorium allows Internet Service Providers to terminate customers for non-payment and no federal law protections exist

Who to Contact in Case of Issues

- Internet Service/ISPs/Cable Co's
 - FCC and the NYS Attorney General
- Cell phone
 - FCC and the NYS Attorney General
- Cable TV
 - FCC, NY PSC, and local municipality ("franchisor")
- Internet/VoIP Telephones (Ooma, Vonage, "Magic Jack" & most cable-phones)
 - FCC and the NYS Attorney General
- Satellite Television
 - FCC and NYS Attorney General

Questions?

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