

Lifeline Services in Maryland

September 2023

Lifeline is a federal program that helps limited-income consumers pay for their telephone and internet services by providing a monthly discount. The cost of the program is shared by all telephone customers. In Maryland, the program is called Tel-Life.

Do I qualify for Lifeline services?

You are eligible for Lifeline if you or your dependent meet one of the below criteria:

- Earn 135% or less of the federal poverty limit

OR

- Participate in one of these programs:
 - Food Supplemental Program (SNAP)
 - Medicaid
 - Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
 - Federal Public Housing Assistance (FPHA)
 - Veterans Pension or Survivors Pension
 - Certain Tribal Programs

How do I sign up for new Lifeline services?

You will sign up through a Lifeline provider company directly. Many companies advertise their Lifeline services, or you may find a list at www.lifelinesupport.org. When you sign up for Lifeline, you will need to provide the following information:

- Full legal name
- Date of birth
- Last four digits of Social Security number
- Address

You will also need to provide one of the following to verify identity:

- Valid ID
- Social Security card
- Medicaid card
- Prior year’s tax return
- Other proof of identity or address

Proof of income:

- Proof of annual gross income
- Proof of program participation (SNAP, Medicaid, etc.)

What services are covered by Lifeline?

You can apply Lifeline assistance to one of these options:

- Existing voice -- fixed (home phone)
- Existing voice -- mobile (cell phone)
- Standalone broadband internet (mobile or fixed)
- Existing or new bundles of voice (fixed or mobile) and broadband internet

What do the terms “fixed,” “mobile,” and “broadband” mean?

The term “fixed” refers to a phone or broadband service that is wired to your home, like a landline telephone or DSL internet.

The term “mobile” is used to refer to voice or broadband service that moves with you -- it is “mobile,” like a cell phone or a smartphone.

The term “broadband” refers to internet services. A cell phone may have voice-only services. If it has mobile broadband, you can access the internet on the cell phone.

Do Lifeline service providers have to offer devices (landline, wireless, or smart phones) at no cost?

No. The Lifeline program does not cover the cost of devices. A customer must pay for the device, unless the provider offers you a free phone at its expense. Wireless providers often provide free cell phones.

What is the difference between a cell phone and a smart phone?

Every mobile phone is a cell phone. A cell phone offers voice and text services, and sometimes picture and video messaging. A smart phone is a cell phone plus an operating system, so the device can perform many functions of a computer. A smart phone has a touchscreen and an operating system that lets you download applications (apps). It also lets you access the internet, store data, and use emails and social network accounts. Phone companies sell different types of data plans with their phones -- the more data you can use, the more you pay, and it can really add up quickly.

Will I automatically get internet as a part of my Lifeline package?

No. You may choose to apply your discount to broadband or bundled services, but it is not automatic.

Are there minimum service standards?

Lifeline service providers must meet the following minimum standards:

- Mobile phone: At least 1000 minutes per month provided
- Mobile internet: Speed of 3G or better and usage of at least 4.5G per month provided
- Home internet: Speed of 25/3Mbps and usage of at least 1024GB per month provided
- Bundled services: At least one of the services (voice or internet) must meet the minimum standards for that service

What are the Lifeline program rules?

Key Lifeline rules include:

- Only one Lifeline benefit is allowed per household. A household is any individual or group of individuals who live together at the same address and share income and expenses. A household is not permitted to receive Lifeline service from more than one provider. Violation of the one-per-household rule will result in de-enrollment.
- A resident in a group home, nursing home, assisted living, or similar facility can be certified as one household.
- There is an annual re-certification requirement.
- A Lifeline customer cannot transfer the benefit to any other person.
- If your Lifeline supported service is free, use it at least once every 30 days. If you don't, you will get a 15-day notice to use it or it will get turned off.

Once I enroll, can I transfer my Lifeline benefit from one Lifeline provider to another?

You may transfer your benefits to a different provider at any time. To do this, simply contact the new provider and ask them to transfer your Lifeline benefit. The provider will need the following information to complete your request:

- Full legal name
- Date of birth
- Last four digits of Social Security number
- Address
- Phone number
- Your consent (verbal or written)

What if I have problems with a Lifeline provider? Where do I make a complaint?

First, you should contact the provider to try and resolve the problem. If you are not satisfied, there are other agencies you can contact.

Office of the Attorney General of Maryland

Consumer Protection Division

200 St. Paul Place

Baltimore, MD 21202

410-528-8662: Consumer Mediation Unit Hotline

Email: consumer@oag.state.md.us

If you have a complaint about deceptive or misleading advertising or contracts or you have a complaint about a wireless or broadband provider, contact the Office of the Attorney General.

Maryland Public Service Commission

Office of External Relations

6 St. Paul Street, 16th Floor

Baltimore, MD 21202

410-767-8028

File a complaint online: www.psc.state.md.us

The Maryland Public Service Commission certifies Lifeline providers and has regulatory authority over landline voice providers. It does not have regulatory authority over wireless or broadband providers.

Universal Service Administrative Company

www.usac.org

For general information on the Lifeline program.