



National Congress of American Indians

# NCIA News

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## Universal Service Board Seeks Comments On Lifeline and Link-Up Service

On October 12, the Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service (Joint Board) issued a notice seeking comments on Lifeline Assistance and Link-Up America, two federal programs that are designed to ensure that low-income Native Americans and others can afford telephone service.

Tribal leaders and other interested parties are strongly encouraged to file comments regarding the overall effectiveness of Lifeline and Link-Up, as well as on the programs' eligibility criteria and outreach efforts in Indian Country.

### Background

The Telecommunications Act of 1996, P.L. 104-104, requires that quality telecommunications and information services be available to low-income consumers at just, reasonable, and affordable rates. In an effort to meet this requirement, the FCC created the Lifeline and Link-Up America programs, which are administered by the Universal Service Administration.

The Lifeline program waives the federal subscriber line charges (currently \$3.50) for qualified subscribers and provides an additional reduction in a qualified subscriber's local phone bill. Telecommunications carriers may receive between \$30.25 and \$32.85 in monthly subsidies for qualifying subscribers on tribal lands, depending on factors such as state matching. As a result, most qualifying subscribers receive local phone service for \$1 per month.

The Link-Up program provides qualified residents on tribal lands with up to \$100 to cover the costs associated with connecting to the telephone network. Eligible charges include any connection charges the carrier customarily assesses, including facilities-based charges associated with line extensions or the construction of facilities needed to initiate service. The subsidy does not apply to charges for facilities or equipment on the customer side of the connection, such as inside wiring. Link-Up also includes a plan to encourage local telephone companies to offer low-income subscribers a deferred payment plan for hook-up charges.

### Eligibility

Currently, eligibility for the Lifeline and Link-Up programs for non-reservation residents varies by state. States that provide state matching support set their own criteria based on narrowly targeted eligibility criteria based on income or on factors directly related to income. In states that do not provide matching support, a consumer may be eligible for Lifeline and Link Up if they currently participate in one or more of the following programs: Medicaid, food stamps, Supplemental

Security Income, federal public housing assistance, and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

Broader consumer qualification criteria for Lifeline and Link Up have been established to include means-tested or income- based programs in which low-income consumers living on reservations are more likely to participate. Consumers living on reservations also may count participation in any of the following programs to establish eligibility: Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Head Start (if income eligible), and the National School Lunch Program.

Some tribal leaders have expressed concern that these eligibility requirements are too narrow and that they fail to include all needy individuals, some of whom may not receive services from federal means-tested programs. Others have expressed the view that tribal nations, like states, should be authorized to set their own eligibility criteria for participation in Lifeline and Link-Up for consumers within their jurisdictional area.

In providing comments to the Joint Board regarding eligibility, tribal leaders are urged to discuss the following issues:

- How modifications to the current federal eligibility criteria would impact Lifeline and Link-Up on reservations
- Whether tribal members should be able to participate in Lifeline and Link-Up by virtue of their eligibility for low-income assistance programs, rather than actual enrollment in these programs
- Whether Lifeline enrollees should be immediately removed from the program when they no longer meet the eligibility standards, or should be guaranteed enrollment for a specific period of time
- Whether eligibility based on income level should be added to the existing eligibility standards as an additional means to qualify for Lifeline and Link-Up, and, if so, what guidelines should be used to establish the appropriate income level and what means should be used to verify income
- Whether tribal governments be authorized to establish their own eligibility criteria for Lifeline and LinkUp

### Outreach

FCC rules currently require eligible telecommunications carriers to publicize the availability of Lifeline and Link-Up support in a manner designed to reach those likely to qualify for these programs.

According to comments at the NCAI Tribal Leader Digital Divide Summit, held on May 15, 2001, this requirement is not being met on Indian lands with any regularity. Several tribal representatives expressed their frustration with their local carriers' failure to promote Lifeline and Link-Up to tribal subscribers. On the other hand, tribal telecommunications companies, such as Gila River Telecommunications, Inc., have publicized these programs through a variety of mechanisms, including door-to-door canvassing.

Tribal leaders are urged to comment on whether more extensive consumer education and outreach efforts are needed to increase participation in Lifeline and Link-Up. Other issues worthy of discussion include:

- Whether existing websites on Lifeline and Link-Up ([www.universalservice.org](http://www.universalservice.org)) provide adequate information to tribal governments, telecommunications companies, and consumers
- Whether the FCC should adopt specific outreach requirements for Indian Country if current efforts are not effectively providing information to low-income consumers

If your tribe is currently participating in an outreach effort, we encourage you to provide information about your program, including the costs and benefits of preparing and distributing information about Lifeline and Link-Up, and the methods used to effectively disseminate information to eligible tribal members.

#### Other Issues

The Joint Board also is attempting to develop a full record of the effectiveness of Lifeline and Link-Up. As such, it has asked commentors to provide information on the number and percentage of low-income households that have/do not have telephone service; the number and percentage of low-income households that receive/do not receive Lifeline and Link-Up support; and the number and percentage of households that are low-income and not enrolled in federal assistance programs.

#### Filing Information

Comments may be filed up to 60 days from publication in the Federal Register, which has not yet occurred. The reply comment deadline is 120 days after the publication date.

Comments may be filed using the FCC's Electronic Comment Filing System (ECFS) or by filing paper copies. ECFS comments should be sent as an electronic file via the Internet to <http://www.fcc.gov/e-file/ecfs.html> (only one copy needed). In completing the transmittal screen, commentors should reference CC Docket No 96-45. To receive instructions for e-mail comments, send an e-mail to [ecfs@fcc.gov](mailto:ecfs@fcc.gov) and type "get form < your e-mail address > " as the body of your message. A sample form and directions will be sent in reply.

Parties that choose to file paper comments must submit an original and four copies of each filing. They should be sent to Magalie Roman Salas, Office of the Secretary, Federal Communications Commission, 445 12<sup>th</sup> Street SW, Washington, DC 20554. Three copies should be sent to Sheryl Todd, Accounting Policy Division, Federal Communications Commission, 445 12<sup>th</sup> Street SW, Room 5-B540, Washington, DC 20554. Finally, a read-only disk containing the comments should be sent with a cover letter to the FCC's duplicating contractor at Qualex International, Portals II, 445 12<sup>th</sup> Street SW, Room CY-B402, Washington, DC 20554. The disk should be labeled with the commentor's name, CC Docket No. 96-45, the type of pleading (comment or reply comment), the date of submission, the file name, and the phrase "Disk Copy – Not an Original."

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