

Coronavirus relief measure could net you \$50 toward your broadband bill, help erase the digital divide

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Some in Congress want to do more to narrow the digital divide.

A new bill, The Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act, set to be introduced Thursday in the U.S. House and Senate, devotes more than

\$94 billion to connect currently unserved and underserved communities with affordable high-speed internet access.

The coronavirus pandemic exposed the problems caused by the [digital divide](#), the disparity in access to [broadband](#) and computers or devices to successfully participate in remote school and work. "The pandemic put a big magnifying glass on this issue," Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., who is introducing the bill in the Senate, told U.S. TODAY.

Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., who launched the Rural Broadband Task Force two years ago to address the digital divide, plans to introduce the bill in the House of Representatives. He did the same last year, hoping former President Donald Trump would include it in his \$2 trillion infrastructure plan, which never was officially unveiled.

Clyburn now hopes President Joe Biden's plan will wrap the internet act into his own infrastructure plan, which does include provisions for universal broadband access. Expanding and improving high-speed broadband networks in [rural areas](#) is a vital trade-off for other infrastructure spending in major cities, he says. "We have to treat broadband as integral to infrastructure," Clyburn said.

About 30 million Americans do not have access to broadband, according to the Federal Communications Commission. But another report puts that at about 42 million. And about 12 million students are impacted by the digital divide, according to a report from Common Sense, Boston Consulting Group and the Southern Education Foundation.

"The country has seen in a very visceral way we have haves and have-nots in this country," Klobuchar said. "And this isn't going to just go away. We are going to have online learning enhanced all the time. We can't expand this divide, you have to actually close it."

What's in affordable internet act?

The biggest chunk of funding (\$80 billion) is allocated to improving access in unserved areas with below 25 Megabits per second (Mbps) connectivity, and for so-called mid-tier areas with service between 25 Mbps and 100 Mbps. Providers who get government support must offer an affordable service plan.

Requirements for coordination of transportation and broadband infrastructure projects to better coordinate and "dig once" for road repairs and broadband installation.

An additional \$6 billion for the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) Program, which gives low-income Americans a monthly discount of up to \$50—and up to \$75 for homes on tribal lands—for broadband service.

Congress allotted \$3.2 billion for the EBB program in the roughly \$900 billion COVID-19 relief package passed Dec. 21, 2020 and subsequently signed by President Trump, and it is in the works at the FCC.

The FCC established the program on Feb. 25 and is currently taking applications from providers of wired and wireless connectivity, but some providers such as Q-Link is already signing up consumers for unlimited talk, text and data. Consumers are expected to be able to apply before the end of April.

Broadband benefit program details

Q. What is the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program?

A. It offers a \$50 monthly discount for broadband services (\$75 for

those on Tribal lands) and a one-time discount of up to \$100 for a computer or tablet purchased through a participating provider. (One discount per eligible household.)

Q. Who qualifies?

A. Those currently qualified for the Lifeline program, the program that helps low-income Americans purchase broadband access, and those on Medicaid or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Those in the free and reduced-price school lunch program and school breakfast program. Those who had a substantial loss of income since Feb. 29, 2020 (full guidelines on the FCC.gov site).

Q. Does it give you credits from previous months of internet service?

A. No, the Emergency Broadband Benefit program can only provide a monthly discount from the time of consumer sign-up.

Q. If a consumer already qualifies for Lifeline, do they need to sign up for this separately or do they automatically become part of the program?

A. Current Lifeline participants are eligible for the Emergency Broadband Benefit program. They do not need to apply but they will need to voluntarily enroll into the Emergency Broadband Benefit program through a participating internet provider or the FCC.

Q. What providers will be involved?

A. The FCC will be providing a web page for all approved EBB providers, so eligible households can easily see if their ISP is participating in the program once the [program](#) is available for consumer sign-up. Right now, the agency is evaluating interested EBB providers on a rolling basis.

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