



Right to Connect

# lifeline toolkit

# 2016



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# Lifeline to the Future: Guide to Collect Stories

Access to the Internet has become today's new civil rights issue for our communities, especially low-income communities of color.

## **SECTION 1: Issue Brief**

It wasn't long ago that our society depended on the telephone as our primary means of communications. In today's digital world, our ability to communicate depends on an Internet connection. Access to the Internet has become the new civil rights issue for our communities, especially low-income communities of color. Communications and information services are essential tools for everyday living; they are as important as access to energy and water.

## THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Millions of Americans do not have broadband access at home, primarily because they cannot afford it. While data shows that low-income communities are increasingly accessing the Internet through a mobile device, smartphones are not a replacement for Internet access in the home because they are slow and expensive.

Low-income folks who lack meaningful access to the Internet struggle in other facets of life. Although some have access to the Internet through a smartphone, they are less likely to own another type of computing device, less likely to have a bank account, and less likely to be covered by health insurance. Without broadband access at home, students are not able to complete their homework, job seekers can't apply for the many jobs that require online applications, online or distance education is not accessible, and low-income families can't access the many forms of government services—from driver's licenses to social services—they need to survive.

Society benefits when everybody is connected to employment, health care, education, and emergency services. Extending the promise of the Internet to our society's most vulnerable and disadvantaged will bring about the biggest impact to our society as a whole.

## LIFELINE

Lifeline is a federal program that has connected millions of qualifying low-income households to telephones for more than 30 years. It was established in 1985 to ensure that every resident in the country could access a telephone in the home. At the time, telephones were viewed as an essential utility, like electricity or water. Lifeline, through a modest subsidy, ensures that every family who can't afford a telephone connection, can do so through this program.

In 2005, the program was updated to include cell phone services. As we enter 2016, with more and more people relying on the Internet to meet many of their personal needs, Lifeline must be expanded to include broadband access. Low-income communities deserve an Internet that is affordable, reliable, and accessible and supports their ability to participate in society.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is now in the process of updating the Lifeline program to include Internet access for low-income individuals.

### MODERNIZING LIFELINE

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is now in the process of updating the Lifeline program to include Internet access for low-income individuals. Community leaders, national civil rights groups, consumer organizations and others are working together to urge the FCC to adopt a program that supports high quality, reliable, and affordable Internet service. Once the FCC approves this program, every state in the nation will have the opportunity to offer this program to its most vulnerable populations.



# Fact Sheet: The Digital Divide

## What is the digital divide?

The digital divide is the gap between those communities that have access to the Internet and those communities that do not. Often, this gap falls along racial, economic, and geographical lines.

## Who is affected by the digital divide?

As more people depend on the Internet for information and essential communications, low-income communities continue to be left behind. While 92 percent of households with incomes between \$100,000 and \$150,000 have broadband service, the adoption rate is only:

- 47% for households with income below \$25,000
- 64% for African Americans and 53% for Latino/as
- 63% for people with disabilities
- 51% for people with limited English proficiency
- 38% for households that prefer Spanish

## But aren't a lot of people accessing the Internet through a smartphone?

Yes, but smartphone access is insufficient and expensive. Tasks such as homework and job applications cannot be completed on a phone. Also, according to a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center, 44 percent of low-income smartphone owners have had to cancel or suspend their service due to financial constraints. And for those whose only access to the Internet is their smartphone, 48 percent have had to cancel or shut off their cell phone for a period of time, because the cost of maintaining the service was a financial hardship.

## What is the homework gap?

Five million school-aged children in the United States do not have an Internet connection at home. A recent study by the Hispanic Heritage Foundation found that nearly 50 percent of students were unable to complete a homework assignment because they lacked Internet access.

## Isn't the internet more of a luxury?

Affordable and reliable Internet access can no longer be considered a luxury. Full participation in our society is a right that should be available to everyone. In its National Broadband Plan, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) says:

Broadband is a platform for social and economic opportunity. It can lower geographic barriers and help minimize socioeconomic disparities—connecting people from otherwise disconnected communities to job opportunities, avenues for educational advancement and channels for communication.

# Fact Sheet: Lifeline

## What is Lifeline?

Lifeline is a government program that helps low-income families afford wired or wireless telephone service. Through a modest monthly subsidy (\$9.25), eligible families are able to access the service they need most. Established during the Reagan administration in 1985, the Lifeline program was reformed in 2005 under the George W. Bush administration to include wireless phone service. More than 13 million American families currently benefit from \$1.6 billion in Lifeline support.

## Who is eligible for Lifeline?

Low-income Americans who live at or below 135% of the poverty line are eligible for a Lifeline subsidy. For example, a family of four that makes \$33,000 or less would be eligible for Lifeline.

## Why are telephones referred to as a universal service?

Universal service is a term referring to the goal of providing a baseline level of services to every resident of a country. Services that are universally provided are often referred to as utilities and include access to heat, clean water, indoor plumbing, telephone services, and public transportation.

## What is the Universal Service Fund?

The Universal Service Fund requires all telecommunications providers to contribute a percentage of their revenues to a fund that supports programs like Lifeline. Consumers may notice a "universal service" item on their telephone bills. The money from this item helps to fund the Universal Service Fund.

## Why should the Lifeline program expand to broadband access?

Like the telephone in the 1980s, the Internet today is a pivotal part of our daily lives. Applying for a job, finishing school assignments, and staying in touch with loved ones near and far requires Internet access. As more of our lives are being conducted online, those left behind are facing dire consequences.

# Fact Sheet: The FCC and Lifeline



## What is the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)?

The FCC is the federal agency in charge of regulating all telecommunications in the United States. In addition to telephones, they also set regulations for communications platforms like radio, TV, and the Internet.

## What is the FCC proposing to do around Lifeline?

Recently, the FCC announced its intention to modernize the program to add broadband Internet as an eligible Lifeline service. That means that low-income families who meet the Lifeline income requirement or participate in certain other government programs could soon afford to have Internet access at home.

## How should the FCC modernize Lifeline?

The FCC should modernize the Lifeline program by updating it to include broadband. However, millions of people still depend on the program to afford a telephone connection. As the FCC upgrades the program, it should ensure that families in need a telephone connection are still able to maintain service under the new modernized Lifeline.

## What kind of internet access should people get?

The FCC must ensure that Lifeline subscribers get access to a quality, reliable Internet connection that meets the needs of these families. Lifeline Broadband should adopt standards for: high quality service and connections, speeds that support rich Internet applications, consumer protection, and affordability.

## What should the FCC consider around eligibility?

The FCC should consider a diverse approach towards determining eligibility. Many low-income Americans already participate in other federal low-income programs. In addition to income standards, programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), Medicaid and SSI should help determine eligibility for Lifeline. And to address concerns against giving away too much personal information a unique Personal Identification Number should be created for eligible households. A unique PIN number, instead of the last four digits of a social security number, will provide broader eligibility, stronger security and greater protection from identify theft and ensure subscriber privacy.

## What else should the FCC do to expand Lifeline?

Some states design their own Lifeline programs and many, like California, have already exceeded federal minimum requirements. The FCC or Congress should enact regulations that encourage states to contribute their own subsidies to Lifeline customers



# Right to Connect: A Story Collection Guide

## **Purpose of this Toolkit**

This toolkit is designed for community-based organizations that work directly with low-income families. These organizations are in the best position to collect stories from impacted communities because those relationships already exist. The stories collected through this process will be used to support efforts to modernize the Lifeline program.

The stories collected through this toolkit will guide the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and others about what the program should look like,



including: whether they can choose between phone or an Internet connection, how much it should cost, how they are impacted by eligibility requirements, privacy concerns, and speed. These stories need to be heard and we need your help to amplify those voices.

The stories collected through this process will be used to support efforts to modernize the Lifeline Program.

## WHO WE ARE

This toolkit is a collaborative effort by community-based organizations across the country to fill the gap in the kinds of information that get to decision makers. This toolkit was created by The Utility Reform Network and Media Alliance with support from the Greenlining Institute, Center for Rural Strategies, Media Mobilizing Project, and Milestone Consulting. It is produced by the Media Action Grassroots Network.

## WHY STORIES? WHY NOW?

For communities organizing for social change, stories are one of the most powerful tools we have. Stories help center the voices of communities who often aren't heard from and shape the hearts and minds of people in ways that data or a legal brief cannot. More importantly, stories have the power to influence and support decision makers who often make policy in a vacuum because they do not hear from communities most impacted whenever important policy decisions are made. If the FCC is going to create a program that will benefit our low-income communities, it needs to hear from the impacted community.

The authors of this toolkit are working to advocate the FCC for the best possible outcome for a modernized Lifeline. We believe that by assembling a full gallery of stories and making it available to the FCC, the media, and the public, we will enrich the discussion and expand chances of crafting the best program policies.

This section will provide the steps you'll take in collecting stories to support a strong Lifeline program.

# How are we Collecting Stories?



We believe the best stories will come from the communities themselves. That's why we're enlisting the support of community-based organizations in collecting stories. Some organizations will be more comfortable gathering video, audio, or just plain written testimony from members of the community they work with. We're collecting all of these stories through a Storybank.

The Storybank is an online platform designed to collect multimedia stories from our community-based partner organizations. The stories will focus on voices from the community who would be impacted by the Lifeline Program. The Lifeline Story Bank is hosted by the Media Action Grassroots Network. It can be found at [www.mag-net.org/storybank](http://www.mag-net.org/storybank)

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Thank you for helping!  
This Right To Connect  
toolkit was developed  
to make it as easy  
possible to collect  
and submit stories. It  
provides questions to  
use, tips for bringing  
out the telling details  
that make a story  
compelling, multiple  
platforms for collecting  
stories in the way that  
is easiest for you, and  
everything you'll need  
to submit stories to one  
central location.



The most powerful stories will come from Lifeline customers, former Lifeline customers and communities who could benefit from the Lifeline program. It is important to choose people who can speak about how the program has helped them when they needed it the most. Here are some tips as you plan to collect stories ►

### Additional Resources from the Center for Media Justice

[What's Your Story Worksheet: A guide to crafting your story](#)

[Values Vocabulary Worksheet: Value words that make our stories more compelling](#)

- Explain what you are doing. Let the storyteller know that the Federal Communications Commission is collecting comments on what a Lifeline Broadband program should look like and you are working with other groups to collect stories from Lifeline Customers to support the expansion.
- Capture Lifeline Success Stories. For current or former Lifeline subscribers what did the program enable them to do?
- Have questions about broadband ready. Help them feel comfortable by letting them know what you'll ask.
- Be flexible. Some people may be more comfortable as part of a group setting or will not want to be videotaped. That's okay. Be sure to have a sign up sheet distributed to the group and ask them to state their first name every time they make a comment.
- Include non-English speakers. Allow people to tell their stories in the language in which they are most comfortable. The story will be more compelling if people are able to use their own words.
- Collect release forms. So that we have permission to use stories, please collect release forms. We've provided a sample release form in the next section.

# Checklist Story Prompts

Below are a few things to think about as you're getting ready to document a story. Ensure the person telling the story feels comfortable with what they are planning to say and provide an opportunity for them to ask any clarifying questions.

## Checklist

- Decide how the story will be documented (video, audio, written)
- Gather the materials for documentation (camera, recorder, computer, paper, etc.)
- Share the story prompt (examples below)

## Story Prompts

The stories that will impact agencies like the FCC the most will be those that capture some key pieces of information. Share the story prompt with interviewee as they prepare to work on their stories. Like any other story, this story should contain a beginning, middle, and an end. Their story should be broken down the following way:

- **Introduce Yourself:** What is your name? What city do you live in? What other things about you should a policymaker should know that would help them understand why having broadband at home is important to you?
- **Story Prompt:** How does NOT having broadband access at home negatively impact or harm your life? If you had broadband at home, how might that improve your life? What would broadband at home enable you to do that is harder without it? If you had to choose between internet and phone, what would you choose?
- **Message to Lawmakers:** What kind of a low-income broadband program would you like to see?



# Sample Story

## SAMPLE STORY

### Introduces Self:

My name is Gina Rodriguez, I live in Oakland, Calif., and I'm a mother of three. I'm also on a fixed income and in the past have participated in the Lifeline program.

### Story Prompt:

Not having Internet access at home means that I constantly have to take my children to the library or McDonalds for them to finish their homework. I also need the Internet in order to work on my resume and search for jobs. It's made it really difficult to provide for my three children. I've tried having Internet at home in the past but I can never afford it. Having the Internet at home would allow my children to do their homework peacefully at home. For me, it would be a way to get and maintain a job.

### To Lawmakers:

I'd like to see a Lifeline program that provides me with access to an affordable and high-quality Internet connection.

# How to Upload Stories



Once you've collected stories from your community, you'll have an opportunity to add these stories to our Storybank. You can submit stories through an online form, call or text your testimony to a phone number or e-mail us a short video testimony. All can be done from our Storybank page. Here are the steps for uploading those stories to our Storybank:

**Step 1:** Go to [www.mag-net.org/storybank](http://www.mag-net.org/storybank)

**Step 2:** Select Format (video, audio, written testimony)

**Step 3:** Fill out Contact Info. We may want to be in touch or share this story publicly.

**Step 4:** Upload story.

**Step 5:** You're done!



# Resources:

## Faces of Lifeline



Sheila Gallardo, Social Worker  
Fresno, California, 2015

My mother is 90 years old. She is a mentally sharp 90 years old, but is physically disabled; she doesn't have her right hip do to degenerative arthritis. She needs help walking from her bed to her chair to the bathroom. I help her walk from point A to point B and with her personal needs. I check in on her three to four times a day. I live next door. She lives with my brother who works all day. Whenever I move her from point A to point B, the first thing she looks for and takes with her is her lifeline phone. Her phone is with her at all times. When I leave, she tells me not to worry—that she will call me if she needs me. She feels confident and safe because she has her phone with her. If she also had broadband I would get her on it to pay her bills and to connect with her grandchildren who live in other parts of the country. This would improve her quality of life.

"If she also had broadband I would get her on it to pay her bills and to connect with her grandchildren who live in other parts of the country this would improve her quality of life."



Gina Juarez  
Fresno, California, 2015

My husband just recently went back to work after being on disability for a heart condition, so due to being on a fixed income, we're having a rough time paying all of our bills. One by one, basic things were getting turned off, like our cable and Internet service, home phone service, our trash service. We could no longer afford our car or renter's insurance. Our electricity and water were almost shut off and we even got behind on our rent, it was really scary.

Lifeline telephone service was so helpful. It was one less thing we had to worry about and phone service is such a necessity. When his disability stopped and he began looking for work, he needed a reliable contact number and because of Lifeline, he had one.

A low-income broadband program would be just as helpful and is much needed.

When he was looking for work we would spend hours out of the house looking for someplace that we could find a good strong Wi-Fi connection because the application process for most companies is online. We needed to download, upload, and email. My daughter has graduated from college and now she has to do the same thing as my husband to find work.

Without a reliable affordable phone service, and a broadband connection to communicate with the rest of the world I don't know how long he would have been looking for employment, how much more we would've gone in debt, or even if we would've had a home anymore. We are now once again able to support our children and ourselves. We're happy again, not afraid of what tomorrow will hold. My husband's health continues to improve, I have my best friend back, and my kids have their Daddy back. Life is good!

*"Without a reliable affordable phone service, and a broadband connection to communicate with the rest of the world I don't know how long he would have been looking for employment"*



Jenny Williams,  
English Professor at Hazard  
Community and Technical  
College  
Whitesburg, Kentucky

Try to talk to a student who is in a college class online with dial-up. It really just doesn't work and there are so many of our students who are trying to do that now. If we could increase that infrastructure, especially in those rural areas, it would help us to grow in ways that maybe aren't as evident to someone who is thinking of an urban setting. It's even more important. We can't keep ignoring our rural areas, and expecting them to somehow pull themselves up by their bootstraps with no industry and no way to do it in this economy.

“Try to talk to a student who is in a college class online with dial-up...It really just doesn't work”

# Release Form

## SAMPLE RELEASE FORM

### LIFELINE STORYBANK

By signing this form, I authorize \_\_\_\_\_ (your organization) and the Lifeline Storybank to use the following personal information: the transcript of my interview, my picture, an audio recording of my voice, or a video recording of my interview, and to submit the material to an online storybank.

I understand that any or all of the above content (depending on which I provided) may be accessed by Lifeline advocates, members of the media, and/or government agencies in order to research the impacts of Lifeline reform on program participants and eligible communities.

I understand that my personally identifying information including my street address, telephone number, email address (if any), social security number or any other forms of personally identifying information will not be given out without my explicit permission to do so.

I hereby grant to \_\_\_\_\_ (your organization) and Lifeline Storybank the right to use, publish, and reproduce my name, pictures of me, and audio or video content collected for the use of illustrating my Lifeline story.

I grant permission for the Lifeline Storybank to display the material online and to use in print media contents including presentations, fact sheets, media packets, and brochures as submitted to the storybank.

I acknowledge that I have read the foregoing and I fully understand the contents. If I am not a fluent speaker of the English language, I have received adequate translation assistance to ensure I understand this document fully prior to signing it.

Full Name:

Address:

Phone #:

Email:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: