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AARP VI: New Temporary Federal Initiative Can Save Eligible Households Up to \$50 on High-Speed Internet Bills

Opinion / **Published On July 22, 2021 06:19 AM /**

Staff Consortium **July 22, 2021**

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Connection was more important than ever in 2020, but for many, it was hard to find.

What was once an easy visit with family or friends became a complicated endeavor that took place in front of a computer screen. And if your home or community lacked access to high-speed internet, then the opportunity to connect became even more frustrating.

New research from AARP found that while more older adults (44%) now view tech more positively as a way to stay connected than they did before COVID-19, greater adoption and reliance on technology is uneven, with 15% of adults 50+ not having access to any type of internet, and 60% saying the cost of high-speed internet is an obstacle.

However, a recently launched program from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) might help Virgin Islanders lower their internet bills.

The Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) is a temporary \$3.2 billion program that will provide a discount of up to \$50 per month for high-speed internet services for eligible households and a discount of up to \$75 per month for households on Tribal lands. Those that are eligible may also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 for a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet purchased through a participating provider.

The FCC is defining an eligible household through several different criteria.

Individuals who qualify for the Lifeline program, as well as those who are on Medicaid, receive SNAP benefits, or participate in other federal assistance programs, may be eligible for the monthly discount. Virgin Islanders who experienced a substantial loss of income since February 29, 2020—whose household had a total income below \$99,000 for single filers and \$198,000 for joint filers—are encouraged to apply for the program, as well. Other eligibility criteria include those that are approved to receive benefits under the free school lunch or breakfast program, received a Federal Pell Grant and received it during the award year, and those that meet the eligibility criteria for a participating provider's existing low-income or COVID-19 program.

While the Emergency Broadband Benefit will help many households who have experienced financial setbacks recently, the program is only short-term.

Once the allocated funds are gone, or six months after the federal government declares an end to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program will end. Individuals will receive notice before the program concludes, and the FCC guarantees at least a 50 percent benefit in the final month so participants have enough time to decide the best course of action for their internet needs.

AARP in The Virgin Islands continues to encourage Virgin Islanders to sign up for the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program. The benefit is in high demand, and those struggling to pay for their internet service or those who cannot pay it, should apply without delay. The program especially helps those who see themselves trying to decide whether they should pay their internet service bill and other needs such as food or medicine. It also helps those who have not been able to stay online because of losing their employment.

There is an application process to apply. Eligible households must contact their preferred participating broadband provider directly. Applicants can visit [GetEmergencyBroadband.org](https://www.getemergencybroadband.org) to apply online and to find participating providers in the territory. Applicants can also get an application to submit by mail by calling 1-833-511-0311. The application must be returned with copies of documents showing proof of eligibility to Emergency Broadband Support Center, P.O. Box 7081, London, KY 40742.

Applicants will receive an eligibility determination. Once received, the applicant can contact their preferred service provider to learn of the service plans available under the program and select one.

“So much of our lives have moved online this past year,” said Troy de Chabert-Schuster, AARP in The Virgin Islands State Director. “The importance of connecting people, especially older adults, to affordable, high-speed internet goes beyond what we’ve seen during the pandemic.

“Older adults see the possibilities that stem from being connected online, and they want to learn more and take advantage of those opportunities.”

For more information about EBB, visit aarp.org/vi, aarp.org/EBB, or call 1-833-511-0311.

Submitted by: AARP in the Virgin Islands.

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