



## Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

Your Residential Utility Consumer Advocate

# CONSUMERS' FACT SHEET

### Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

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# TELEPHONE LIFELINE PROGRAMS IN OHIO



Lifeline programs provide financial assistance to low-income residents and help ensure that they can afford telephone service, either through a traditional wireline company or through a qualified wireless provider. Eligible customers must choose to get Lifeline service from either their traditional wireline company or a wireless company, but not both. The traditional home telephone Lifeline programs provide discounts when establishing service, lower monthly service charges and special payment arrangements.

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), your residential utility consumer advocate, offers the following information about Lifeline programs, including benefits, restrictions, qualification guidelines, how to apply and answers to frequently asked questions.

### **Lifeline available from all local wireline carriers**

Enhanced Lifeline services are offered by all local telephone carriers throughout the state to consumers with household incomes at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.

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### 2011 - 2012 PIPP Plus Income Guidelines

A household whose total income is less than the following income guidelines may qualify for PIPP Plus assistance.

Size of household	Total household income	
	for 3 months	for 12 months
1	\$4,084	\$16,335
2	\$5,517	\$22,065
3	\$6,949	\$27,795
4	\$8,382	\$33,525
5	\$9,814	\$39,255
6	\$11,247	\$44,985

*\* For households with more than six members, add \$1,432.50 per person for 3 months and \$5,730 per person for 12 months.*

For Lifeline programs based solely on income eligibility, the following documentation is sufficient to show proof of income:

- ▶ A prior year's state or federal income tax return;
- ▶ A current income statement from an employer or W-2 form;
- ▶ Three consecutive months of current pay stubs;
- ▶ Statement of Social Security benefits;
- ▶ Statement of benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs;
- ▶ Statement of benefits for retirement/pension;
- ▶ Statement of unemployment or workers' compensation benefits;
- ▶ Divorce decree; or
- ▶ Child support documentation.

Ohio law also encourages automatic enrollment of eligible customers into Lifeline programs. For automatic-enrollment programs, consumers need only show that they participate in one of the following programs:

- ▶ Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP);
- ▶ Food stamps;
- ▶ Supplemental Security Income;
- ▶ Federal public housing assistance;
- ▶ Medicaid;
- ▶ National Free School Lunch Program;
- ▶ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (Ohio Works First);
- ▶ Disability insurance; or
- ▶ Social Security Disability Income.

Lifeline customers of traditional wireline companies receive the following benefits:

- ▶ Do not pay service connection charges;
- ▶ Do not pay a deposit to establish service;
- ▶ Do not pay the federal subscriber line charge;
- ▶ Do not pay the intrastate access fee (CenturyLink customers in the former Embarq territory only);
- ▶ Do not pay the access recovery charge (Frontier customers in the former Verizon territory only);
- ▶ Receive a monthly basic service charge discount of \$7.00;
- ▶ Do not pay charges related to the Universal Service Fund and local number portability;
- ▶ Can receive free "toll blocking" and blocking for 900/976 telephone numbers to prohibit all outgoing long-distance calls; and
- ▶ Special payment arrangements (or can re-establish service if previously disconnected) by paying \$25 and the remaining balance over six months.

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### The 2010 telecommunications law and Lifeline

In 2010, a broad-ranging telecommunications law was enacted in Ohio that, among other things, changed Lifeline programs offered by most wireline companies in the state. In addition to providing residential consumers throughout Ohio access to enhanced Lifeline programs, the law also affected Lifeline customers in a variety of ways.

Beginning Jan. 1, 2012, Lifeline customers are no longer exempt from annual price increases for basic local telephone service (that is, wireline service that includes unlimited local calling, with access to long distance carriers and the option to purchase other services, such as caller ID, voice mail, etc., on an individual basis). Lifeline customers continue to receive a discount, but their service may be subject to the same increases (up to \$1.25 per month) as basic service for non-Lifeline customers in those areas where the local telephone company has shown it competes with at least two other telephone providers.

Telephone companies may market bundles and packages of telecommunications services to Lifeline customers. A “bundle” or “package” is a combination of telecommunications services (usually local telephone service plus features such as caller ID and voice mail, long distance, wireless, cable television, Internet and other services) sold together for a single price. It is important that consumers be aware that bundles and packages do not have the same service quality protections—dealing with deposits, installation, billing, disconnection and credits for outages—

established for basic telephone service customers under the law. Consumers also should be careful not to purchase more services than their budget permits.

The law created a statewide board to advertise Lifeline. However, the law does not ensure that this board will receive sufficient funding for its marketing efforts. Also, wireline telephone companies may not collect the costs of providing the Lifeline program from Lifeline customers, but may collect such costs (other than marketing costs) from non-Lifeline customers. Telephone companies are required to submit an annual report to the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) showing the number of Lifeline customers they serve.

### Wireless Lifeline service

In recent years, several wireless telephone companies have received conditional approval by the PUCO to provide Lifeline assistance to low-income residential consumers for wireless service. Currently authorized to offer wireless Lifeline service in Ohio are:

- ▶ **TracFone (SafeLink):** Wherever wireless service is available in Ohio;
- ▶ **American Broadband and Telecommunications:** through AT&T and Verizon Wireless;
- ▶ **Virgin Mobile:** through AT&T and Verizon Wireless;
- ▶ **Nexus dba TSI:** through AT&T and Verizon Wireless;
- ▶ **Cincinnati Bell Wireless:** Southwest Ohio (CBW territory);
- ▶ **i-wireless LLC:** Wherever wireless service is available in Ohio; and
- ▶ **T-Mobile:** T-Mobile coverage area in Ohio.



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The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts.

The state agency also educates consumers about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues.

For more information, please visit the OCC website at [www.pickocc.org](http://www.pickocc.org).



*The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel is an equal opportunity employer and provider of services.*

The level of Lifeline benefits from wireless carriers varies according to the calling plans offered by each company. Generally, wireless companies offer multiple plans offering discounts off the monthly charge and a number of free minutes. Many wireless companies also offer a free handset with their lifeline program. Consumers should remember that only the allotted monthly minutes for each program are free. Additional minutes can be purchased at prices set by the companies, often on a pre-paid basis.

Remember, **customers cannot have Lifeline service through a wireline company and a wireless provider.** Only **one** Lifeline benefit is available per household. When deciding between Lifeline service offered by a wireline company and a wireless provider, consumers should compare their choices to determine which service best meets their individual needs.

## Lifeline Frequently Asked Questions

### Q. What features can a consumer have while on Lifeline?

A. All wireline programs include free blocking of outgoing long distance calls and customers may choose to purchase any other service the company offers. In addition, companies may offer bundles or packages that include multiple services offered by the company. For wireless Lifeline customers, the availability of features depends upon the plan chosen.

### Q. Can a customer receive multiple Lifeline discounts for wireline and wireless phones?

A. No. Lifeline-eligible customers can only receive one Lifeline discount per household, either for wireline service or wireless service.

### Q. Can a customer qualify for Lifeline using another household member's eligibility (i.e., a son or daughter receiving Medicaid)?

A. No. The customer who is named on the telephone account must be the person who qualifies for Lifeline. In addition, the Lifeline customer cannot be claimed as a dependent on another person's taxes.

### Q. Can a customer with a past due amount still sign up for a Lifeline program?

A. It depends. Although companies must offer special payment arrangements to customers who have past due amounts for regulated services, such as basic telephone service, there is no requirement regarding past due amounts for unregulated services, such as video or Internet service.

Under the payment arrangement for regulated services, the customer will be required to make an initial payment of \$25 and pay the remaining amount owed in six equal payments. This is in addition to the current charges owed for local service. A Lifeline service customer with past due toll charges must have toll restricted service until the past due toll charges have been paid or until the customer establishes service with another toll provider.

### Q. If a customer does not stay current on a payment arrangement for Lifeline, does the company have to provide another payment assistance option?

A. No. In most cases if the customer does not stay current with a payment arrangement, the company will require the customer to pay all of the past due local charges to have service restored or to avoid disconnection.