

# Millions of low-income Americans will receive Internet access rebates under new \$7 billion broadband stimulus plan

[Tony Romm](#)



Crews work to hang fiber-optic cable in Amherst, Va. (Kendall Warner/AP)

A massive [coronavirus](#) aid package approved by Congress late Monday sets aside \$7 billion to help Americans connect to high-speed Internet and pay their monthly bills, marking one of the most substantial one-time broadband investments in U.S. history.

Nearly half the money is slated to fund a new monthly benefit for low-income

families, aiming to ensure that those who have lost their jobs can stay online at a time when the pandemic has forced millions of people to work, learn and communicate on their devices from home.

Lawmakers also set aside hefty new sums to expand Internet service to the country's hardest-to-reach areas, upgrade infrastructure that may suffer from security flaws and map the state of the country's connectivity so the U.S. government can better spend any future funding. The broader package [totaling \\$900 billion](#) is awaiting President Trump's signature.

Telecom giants, consumer advocates and Washington policymakers on Tuesday cheered the broadband investment, which is only slightly smaller than the 2009 relief law that Congress adopted in the shadow of the Great Recession. Sen. Maria Cantwell (Wash.), the top Democrat on the chamber's tech-focused Commerce Committee, said the bill would offer "a little bit of help" after the coronavirus illustrated the costs of inadequate connectivity.

But she called on Congress to increase spending in future coronavirus relief efforts, pointing to lingering gaps — particularly in education, since Congress did not authorize new dollars to help students more easily get online.

"We just have to fight in January to get that rectified," the senator said.

[\*Biden, top Democrats lay groundwork for multibillion-dollar push to boost U.S. broadband\*](#)

The heightened congressional investment in speedy, reliable Internet service reflects the unique circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic — and the lingering economic inequalities it has exposed. The country still suffers from a pernicious digital divide, the gap between those who have reliable broadband in 2020 and the millions who still do not. The problem is particularly pronounced among lower-income families and people of color,

and it wreaks some of its worst havoc on children, who may struggle to complete their classwork.

Earlier in the pandemic, more than half of lower-income families said they were worried about their ability to pay for either their home broadband connections or their cellphone bills, according to a survey from the Pew Research Center. Months later, more than 10 million Americans are still out of work, and countless others have experienced pay cuts, furloughs or other economic hardships, threatening to exacerbate an affordability crisis that predates the pandemic.

[\*'It shouldn't take a pandemic': Coronavirus exposes Internet inequality among U.S. students as schools close their doors\*](#)

The stimulus bill seeks to offer critical relief to some of these families, chiefly through a roughly \$3 billion program that allows low-income American households to obtain rebates of up to \$50 each month to cover their broadband bills, or up to \$75 if they live in a tribal area.

At least 33 million households are believed to be eligible for the benefit, according to Matt Wood, the vice president for policy at the advocacy group Free Press. The estimate corresponds with the total number of Americans who are eligible for the Federal Communications Commission's other low-income broadband benefit known as [Lifeline](#). Those who have lost jobs as a result of the pandemic, or enrolled in other safety net programs such as reduced-price school lunches, also may qualify for new broadband rebates under the stimulus law.

"The biggest part of the digital divide is people who cannot afford services they already have available to them," Wood said, adding the money would directly help those who are "not able to make ends meet."

Lawmakers tasked the FCC with devising and managing the benefit, which under the timeline sketched out by lawmakers could start closer to February. Once it is operational, the government is expected to remit payments directly to Internet service providers on Americans' behalf, though these companies are not required to participate. Lawmakers also agreed to reimburse carriers up to \$100 if they provide a device, such as a laptop, to their customers.

"The FCC will act quickly to implement the bill's important provisions once it is adopted and signed into law," the agency's outgoing chairman, Ajit Pai, pledged in a statement late Monday.

[How moonshine, multi-hour Zooms and a deadly pandemic pushed Congress to approve new stimulus](#)

Lawmakers also authorized a full suite of additional spending, including \$1.3 billion in total funding to boost broadband infrastructure in rural and tribal areas. The stimulus sets aside \$250 million for the FCC to help advance telehealth at a time when more Americans are connecting with their doctors online. And it authorizes \$65 million to map the parts of the country that lack broadband, a project Congress commissioned months ago — and until now had repeatedly failed to fund.

"I think it demonstrates Washington woke up in the pandemic to the reality that broadband is no longer nice to have, it's need to have," said Jessica Rosenworcel, a Democratic commissioner at the FCC. "Households without it don't have a fair shot at maintaining some semblance of modern life, when so much of modern life has migrated online."

But the stimulus still stops short of the [more massive sums](#) that some congressional Democrats — and President-elect Joe Biden — have sought as part of a much larger push to rethink the country's digital infrastructure.

House Democrats this year advanced a bill that included \$100 billion in new spending to improve connectivity and affordability nationwide, and Biden has called for at least \$20 billion as part of an initiative to bring the next generation of speedy wireless service, known as 5G, to every part of the country.

Lawmakers also opted against including any new stimulus money for a federal program that helps schools pay for Internet connectivity and critical classroom equipment. An earlier stimulus deal brokered by Senate Democrats and Republicans put aside \$3 billion for the initiative, known as E-Rate, aiming to help schools and libraries provide more WiFi hotspots and laptops to students.

But supporters, including the National Education Association, said Republicans sought onerous restrictions on the aid, ultimately resulting in its exclusion from the final package. The NEA blasted the party and the broader \$900 billion stimulus in a letter Monday for falling "drastically short" because it neglected some students and teachers.

The omissions offered only further evidence to policymakers that Congress needed to return to the issue next year and authorize billions of dollars in additional spending to continue their work.

"This is the beginning of what needs to be a nationwide effort to connect 100 percent of the U.S. to broadband," Rosenworcel said. "This is a down payment."