

# NM has 7th-best enrollment in \$30 per-month internet subsidy

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*Outreach efforts like public meetings and advertisements have helped boost the numbers of residents enrolled in a federal subsidy, known as the Affordable Connectivity Program, to help pay for internet subscriptions. A poster from a New Mexico effort backing broadband expansion is seen during one such public input session Friday, May 12, 2023 at the Doña Ana County Government Center, 845 N. Motel Blvd., Las Cruces. (Photo by: Diana Alba Soular/ SNMJC)*

**SOUTHERN NEW MEXICO** – The state of New Mexico is **outpacing the national average for registering residents in the Affordable Connectivity Program** – a key federal initiative **to help low-income Americans** pay for high-speed internet.

For qualifying families, **the program provides up to \$30 per month toward high-speed internet**. It essentially **subsidizes – sometimes entirely – the**

**cost of a monthly subscription**, an attempt to help families in the COVID-19 era, which **deepened a long-existing need for fast connectivity**.

Many southern New Mexicans **experience steep digital disparities**, which can **severely limit work, education, health care and other opportunities**.

The success so far in signing families up for the subsidy – and giving them cyber access – **appears to be driven by extensive public outreach efforts** from state broadband officials, including **numerous in-person meetings throughout New Mexico; partnerships with the state’s MVD and the public schools** as a way to get families plugged in; and **sometimes hefty grants** to communities that pay for marketing and outreach about the program.

#### **4 in 10 eligible homes enrolled**

An April **analysis of the latest FCC data conducted by the Southern New Mexico Journalism Collaborative** shows that New Mexico **has registered 160,785 of its households for the Affordable Connectivity Program**. This translates to an enrollment **rate of 38 percent of the 418,808 eligible households in the state**, which is **the third-highest ACP enrollment among the nation’s 10 poorest states**, as ranked by the World Population Review. (<https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/poverty-rate-by-state>)

The **national average for all ACP enrollment is 33 percent**, according to the Education Superhighway, a nonprofit that tracks ACP trends. (<https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/no-home-left-offline/acp-data/#dashboard>)

The **top performer in the nation** among the 10 poorest states, according to the FCC data, **is Louisiana**, which has a 46 percent enrollment rate, and is

followed by Kentucky with a rate of 43.

The territory of Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia outpaced all states in ACP enrollment, with rates of 60 and 46 percent, respectively.

**When compared to all states, New Mexico is ranked seventh for the enrollment rate of the ACP program.** While that figure is encouraging, **broadband officials say the depth of internet gaps in the state keep them focused on the reality that New Mexico still has a long way to go** in connecting its residents.

**“It’s still not good enough for what we need,”** said Sandeep Taxali, **broadband program advisor for the New Mexico Office of Broadband Access and Expansion.** “We’re high compared to the other states, but we can do a lot better.”

## **A deeper look at the funding**

**Originally launched in May 2021 as the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program,** this [national initiative was funded](#) with \$3.2 billion by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 “to help low-income households stay connected during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Recognizing the **critical need for the internet beyond the pandemic,** Congress in November of 2021, then **funneled \$14 billion into the program, renaming it the Affordable Connectivity Program,** and described it as a “long-term” effort to help poor households maintain online connections.

“With the long-term Affordable Connectivity Program, we have the opportunity to enroll even more households and help ensure they can afford the internet connections they need for work, school, health care and more

for years," said [FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel in a statement](#).

The **ACP provides a discount of up to \$30 monthly** for broadband hookups for eligible households – or **\$75 for eligible tribal households** – and **also sometimes provides \$100 toward the purchase of a laptop, desktop computer or tablet**, according to the FCC website.

(<https://www.fcc.gov/acp>)

**By identifying Internet service providers who have high-speed subscriptions for \$30 or less, it is possible for low-income households to receive free internet – something experienced by many families in the Las Cruces Public Schools, who are benefiting from a roughly \$10 per-month plan offered by the cable TV/internet provider Comcast Xfinity.** More than one hundred internet providers around the state are registered as benefit providers for the program.

(<https://www.fcc.gov/affordable-connectivity-program-providers>)

Nationally, **54 percent of ACP-enrolled households are using mobile broadband connections**, followed by fixed broadband, like cable TV-based connections, at 45 percent, and fixed wireless or satellite, comprising just under 1 percent of ACP enrollments, according to USAC.

(<https://www.usac.org/about/affordable-connectivity-program/acp-enrollment-and-claims-tracker/additional-acp-data/>)

The Education Superhighway, a national nonprofit focused on closing the digital divide, estimates that **18 million households – 47 million people – across the country have access to broadband internet but are too poor to afford it.** The [nonprofit also estimates that more than 51 million households are eligible](#) for the ACP program, which includes more than 17 million households entirely without internet.

U.S. Census data shows that one year before the COVID-19 pandemic, [more](#)

[than 20 percent of New Mexico did not have a broadband connection](#). And as the pandemic shut down society in March 2020, **it became clear that high-speed internet connections were becoming a basic necessity** for the “new normal” – increasing most everyone’s dependence on online work, school, commerce and entertainment.

Pandemic aside, **New Mexico was also being compelled through a 2018 landmark legal case** – the [Yazzie-Martinez consolidated lawsuit](#) – to provide all of its public school students with an education that was “constitutionally sufficient and uniform” for Hispanic, Native American and other at-risk students.

A 2021 study found that **40 percent of K-12 students in New Mexico did not have an “adequate” connection and more than a quarter of them, 28 percent, did not have either an adequate internet connection nor a device to connect online**, according to by the [Southern Education Foundation, Boston Consulting Group and Common Sense](#) – a research institute that focuses on technology recommendations for families and schools. Further, the report states, 65 percent of students statewide did not have affordable broadband internet available to them.

### **Broadband office spearheading outreach**

The state’s broadband office **has led extensive public outreach meetings, both in-person and online**, which is **believed to have contributed to the relatively high participation so far in the Affordable Connectivity Program**. Officials have been touring New Mexico trying to drum up attention for it, and spreading information about their efforts to funnel federal dollars into building up broadband infrastructure.

The information **gathered during these tours will help form into two plans: the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment plan** – identifying



which communities are most in need of high-speed, affordable internet service – and the **New Mexico Digital Equity Plan**, which maps out how to provide devices to access the internet, as well as where to go for internet training and technical support.

Jennifer Nevarez, a member of the New Mexico Broadband and Digital Equity board and an advisor to the Office of Broadband Access and Expansion, said **these plans will be submitted** the coming year to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, **which will use them to determine each state's high-speed internet funding.**

Key to the state's efforts, she said, is that access to broadband internet "be equitable."

**"It is an all hands-on-deck effort,"** Nevarez said. "Broadband is everybody's business. There is almost nothing that does not touch broadband – transportation, utilities, education, workforce, economic development, health. It touches everything."

**Kelly Schlegel, director of the state Office of Broadband Access and Expansion**, in recent weeks visited **Columbus, a Southern New Mexico border town with a population of about 1,400**, to help spread the word about ACP and the state's effort to connect New Mexicans with affordable high-speed internet.

"I want to get the (ACP enrollment) number much higher, so I'm bringing on a help desk to be able to do that," she said

**Hefty grants have gone to some communities to boost advertising and foster enrollment in the subsidy.** This past March, four state subdivisions and tribes were allotted \$1.5 million grant by the FCC for more ACP outreach. Those recipients were the city of Albuquerque with \$400,000; the New

Mexico Black Leadership Council with \$400,000; the Pueblo of Jemez with \$379,234; and the Pueblo of Zuni with \$325,000.

Closer to home, **a joint effort by Doña Ana County and El Paso County broadband advocates**, Borderplex Connect, **has been awarded \$300,000 in federal funds for promoting ACP awareness** across Doña Ana, Luna and El Paso Counties. (<https://www.lujan.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/n-m-delegation-announces-over-1-5-million-in-affordable-connectivity-outreach-grants%EF%BF%BC/>)

In addition to community meetings, **outreach from the New Mexico Public Education Department to public schools** is credited by state industry experts as being a critical part of New Mexico's efforts so far.

**“That’s a big component of the early successes,”** said Erin Kinnard Thompson, communications manager at the New Mexico Office of Broadband Access and Expansion, who emphasized that her office is new – established by the 2021 New Mexico Legislature – and still assessing broadband needs.

**John Chadwick, technology coordinator for the New Mexico Public Education Department**, said the PED was involved early on with ACP enrollments – primarily for public school families – and added that CTC Technology and Energy, a broadband consultant hired by the state, was **“probably the most effective outreach”** tool for bringing New Mexicans onto the program.

Together with CTC, he said, a **call center was set up, flyers were distributed, and PSA's were sent to the New Mexico Motor Vehicle Division offices**, where people awaiting appointments would see the ads on waiting room monitors.

“We did anything that we could that made sense,” he said.

Broadband officials say **one of the best ways to reach residents is typically direct calls to lower-income households in areas where outreach messages – flyers, community meetings, and PSAs – have been distributed.**

With state officials still touring New Mexico to spread information about ACP, the **impact of the benefits of affordable internet options is still in the early stages of being analyzed.**

The state has not yet studied the impact of ACP connectivity because it is still concentrating on community awareness and registrations, Schlegel said.

### **Many eligible homes not enrolled**

**Though many eligible households have enrolled, six out of 10 have not.** Several **challenges remain to boosting the numbers.** They range from **lack of awareness about the subsidy to skepticism** about government programs **to language barriers.**

### Map of Columbus, New Mexico

In communities like Columbus – small, poor and heavily Spanish-speaking – the biggest hurdle, Schlegel said, is **building trust with a population wary of government tracking.**

“You have to get over that hump of suspicion. It really comes with face-to-face interaction, where they can trust you, and see that you're trying to help them,” she said. “Some people don’t want to give their Social Security number, especially in this area. We have to find ways to help people understand, and to help them to walk through the process.”



Despite the state's efforts, **many New Mexicans still have not heard** about their options at connecting to low-cost internet.

"No, I haven't heard about that," said Brenda Gallegos, a 24-year-old resident of Columbus who lives a few blocks from where Schlegel and state broadband officials were meeting. **She said she is currently paying full price for the internet, and would be interested in saving money,** but added that she "has to learn more about it" before providing any personal information.

Roberto Diaz, who also lives in Columbus, said he was aware of the effort to get student's homes connected to the internet "because of COVID" but said he hasn't heard of any offers for low-cost internet like the ACP program.

**"I don't have the internet, and I would not sign up for the program because I get the internet at work,"** Diaz said. "I know the internet is now necessary for everything. Before you could get by without it, but not anymore."

He said his cell phone is enough for him when he is not at work.

"There's a lot of things you can do on your phone with the internet," Diaz said. "I also use my phone for that."

His neighbor, **Nestor Rascon, an elderly Spanish-speaking man, waved off his need for the internet.**

**"The internet? That's for young people, for the kids,"** he said. "I don't know how to use it, so there is no point in even getting it."

**Eduard Ruxton, an older New Yorker who has lived in Deming since September of 2022,** was dismissive of the government's efforts to provide low-cost internet.

**“I avoid government programs of all kinds,” Ruxton said.** “I grew up in a time when people believed in laissez-faire government – the government that governs best is one which governs least,” he said. “There’s a lot of people who feel that way. Maybe not so much in this part of the country.”

## **Enrollment hurdles persist for some residents**

**Obstacles exist even for those people who are interested in signing up, said Maria Constantine, director for Columbus Village Library.** She said it is common for Columbus residents who don’t speak English, or who lack computer skills, to come to the library for help.

**“With anything technical, they come here.** If they can't figure out how to set up their new smartphone, they come to the library. If they can't get their laptop to work, they come to the library,” she said. “We do a lot of technical services for people.”

Many residents, she said, are **interested in the program but are very hesitant** to provide their information to someone on the telephone.

“People around here, they don't want to call a government phone number and give them information about themselves. That’s beyond their comfort zone,” Constantine said.

“A woman came in about a month ago,” she recalled, “and she wanted to sign up for the program, but she wanted to sit with me to do that. **I don’t think she wanted to give her personal information with somebody over the phone.**”

**Constantine said the woman was interested in using the ACP program to pay for her internet** with Valley TeleCom Group, which has just received more than \$5 million in funding from the Connect New Mexico Pilot Program

to provide broadband service to 822 Columbus units.

But Constantine said when she tried to sign up the woman for the ACP, they were unable to register because **the woman did not have an existing telephone account** with Valley TeleCom.

“Because she didn't have a landline, she couldn't fill out their application for the ACP because it asked for her telephone account number, and she was not able to get signed up,” Constantine said.

Camme Carlson Watkins, with the Valley TeleCom Group marketing department, said that **anyone should be able to sign up for the ACP program, regardless of whether they have an existing landline** with the company.

“That is not necessary. They can be brand-new customers,” she said.

**It is this type of confusion in the ACP process**, Constantine said, that has kept low-income Columbus residents from signing up for assistance.

### **Language, lack of addresses can be barriers, too**

Another problem is that many homes **in communities like Columbus only use P.O. boxes**, and their homes are not assigned “official addresses on any databases” so they can't sign up for ACP, Constantine said.

Obstacles are quickly stacked against many low-income New Mexicans interested in ACP, she said. Limited English skills, limited computer skills, nonexistent addresses, and confusing website registrations impede what she agrees is a good program for people like the woman she tried to help register.

“Ultimately, I gave the woman all her documentation for the ACP

qualifications, and the phone number to call Valley TeleCom directly, and she left, so I don't know what happened," Constantine said.

Even among English speakers, small towns in New Mexico are not receiving ACP information, said Mary Strange, a resident who lives in the City of the Sun, a small community at the edge of Columbus.

**"It's hard getting information.** You can get some things from the library, but not always. We don't have like an information cell, like a marquee or something, that people can see," she said. "People have not heard enough about (the ACP). I know I have not," she said.

Schlegel, the director of the state Office of Broadband Access and Expansion, **characterizes the current phase of ACP enrollment as "a period of trust-building"** with New Mexican communities, and is overseeing an ambitious campaign to inform as many New Mexicans as possible about available options for low-cost internet access.

To do this, she said, **the state is purchasing "databases that tell us where the highest need is"** and will **set up a call center to contact those people**, informing them of the ACP program.

## **Funding for ACP uncertain**

As state broadband officials continue their tour through the state, they express a shared concern: **federal funding running out, and forcing the ACP program to be shelved.** The timeline on the **sunset of funding is unknown.**

"I've heard several different estimates," Chadwick said. "You know, more than likely, unless there's congressional intervention, sometime between early and mid-2024 is when the funding will run out."

The effort now, he said, is to focus on “a long-term strategy and try to move some of the federal funding, which is not going to last forever, over into state funding.”

**Schlegel said she has “heard rumors that they might reenergize another fund at the federal level”** and that she has had conversations with New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham about possible ways to continue ACP’s funding.

**When asked what the likelihood of long-term ACP funding, Schlegel said she was unsure**, but she’ll be making the case to state lawmakers to continue it, once federal funding ends.

“I’m probably about 50-50 right now,” she said. “I’ve heard it from reliable sources but have not seen my full-on evidence yet. I’m not sure exactly how it’s going to go.”

To register for ACP, visit [www.affordableconnectivity.gov/](http://www.affordableconnectivity.gov/). Internet companies often notify new customers about the program and eligibility requirements when they sign up for a plan.

***Reyes Mata III is a freelance journalist working with the Southern New Mexico Journalism Collaborative to cover COVID-19 and pandemic recovery from a solutions-reporting lens. For info, visit [www.southNMnews.org](http://www.southNMnews.org) or [surNMnoticias.org](http://surNMnoticias.org).***

***Affordable Connectivity Program Enrollment Rates***

***<https://www.usac.org/about/affordable-connectivity-program/acp-enrollment-and-claims-tracker/#enrollment-by-state>***