

# [***'Should have been done yesterday': Rural, older Americans could get hurt as affordable internet program runs out of cash***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BX6-VHB1-DY7V-G06M-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

April 29, 2024 Monday 11:00 AM GMT

Copyright 2024 Cable News Network All Rights Reserved

**Length:** 2215 words

**Byline:** By Brian Fung and Jason Carroll, CNN

**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; For Cindy Westman, the internet is a literal lifeline. She depends on internet access to care for her 12-year-old daughter - who has cerebral palsy and autism - by messaging doctors, accessing test results and scheduling critical medical appointments virtually.

But it's not easy to stay connected in Westman's small, rural town of Eureka, Illinois. With a population of 5,100, many of Eureka's residents struggle to afford food and oil changes, let alone home internet.

"When we're on the go and she's hungry, I feed her and then I'll come home and eat," said Westman, who is 43. "She doesn't know any better, because with her developmental disability, all she knows is, '[I'm] hungry, and Mom feeds me.'"

Since 2021, struggling Americans like Westman - who gave up a career in information security to care for her child - have made ends meet with the help of a popular federal benefit known as the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which covers home internet service.

For Westman, who gets by on Social Security disability payments,the up to $30 of monthly credits from the government make all the difference, covering her entire internet bill.

But in just a few weeks, her internet bills, and those of other Americans like her, could skyrocket by hundreds of dollars a year. That's because the ACP is running out of funds - and Congress shows no signs it will approve more. Policy experts have described the situation as a fast-approaching economic crisis and a major step backward for closing the digital divide between internet haves and have-nots.

In May, that hard reality will begin to set in as Westman's and more than 23 million other households [*will receive only partial benefits*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/10/tech/internet-discount-low-income-americans-funding-fcc/index.html) before the ACP is shut down for good, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has warned, a financial shock that could make it even harder for low-income US households to get by.

"Because of political gameplay, about 60 million Americans will have to make hard choices between paying for the internet or paying for food, rent, and other utilities, widening the digital divide in this country," said Gigi Sohn, a former top FCC official. "It's embarrassing that a popular, bipartisan program with support from nearly half of Congress will end because of ***politics***, not policy."

The collapse of the ACP will affect nearly 60 million individual Americans, going by Census Bureau [*population estimates*](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/). The program is heavily used by Americans over age 50, military veterans and low-income working families nationwide, according to FCC data.

'I have to account for every penny'

Every week, Cynthia George connects with her granddaughter and great-grandson on video calls. The 71-year-old retiree reads the news on her MSN homepage and googles how to fight the bugs coming from her drain in Florida's summer heat. She hunts for grocery deals on her Publix app so that her food stamps stretch just a little further.

But George worries the ACP's collapse may force her to make a difficult choice: Buy enough food to feed herself - or pay her home internet bill.

"My grandkids, they make fun of me," George said with a chuckle. "They say I'm cheap. I go, 'No, Grandma's thrifty.' I don't have any choice; I have to account for every penny. And this would mean that that food bill would have to be cut down. There's no place else I would be able to take it from."

For many people like George, the loss of subsidies would hinder everything from seeing doctors and getting medications to accessing public benefits to their ability to do school and work.

Biden and congressional Democrats have [*blamed Republicans on Capitol Hill for blocking legislation*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/02/tech/biden-administration-republicans-internet-bill-hikes/index.html) that would extend the ACP, even as many red congressional districts have received millions of dollars from the program, according to [*data published*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/02/06/fact-sheet-as-affordable-connectivity-program-hits-milestone-of-providing-affordable-high-speed-internet-to-23-million-households-nationwide-biden-harris-administration-calls-on-congress-t/) by the White House.

"Most of the people who have signed up from this are from rural America," Texas Democratic Rep. Marc Veasey, who represents a district in Dallas, told CNN. "People think of this as something that helps people in districts like mine that are in highly populated, very dense urban centers, but the fact of the matter is, [many] Republican constituencies are benefiting from this. And so you would think they would want to actually step up for their own people. They're not doing it, and it's frustrating, because as a result, every district is hurting because of it."

Many ACP subscribers have told CNN they are irate at Congress for letting them down and, through inaction, taking away a basic, essential utility.

Just over two years into the ACP's existence,the FCC has already been forced to begin shutting down the program - halting new signups, warning users their credits are about to be suspended and announcing sharp cuts to benefits. In May, the program's final month, ACP subscribers will only receive [*about half*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/10/tech/internet-discount-low-income-americans-funding-fcc/index.html) of what the government has promised them.

FCC Commissioner Geoffrey Starks has crisscrossed the nation talking to Americans who depend on the ACP. During one visit to a nursing home, roughly a dozen older Americans approached him to say the ACP helped them access the internet for the first time.

"It's telemedicine, visiting their grandkids, going to church online," Starks told CNN.

"I did a town hall in Las Vegas," he added, "where a number of folks were downright angry and upset. They said, 'This program only got started in 2022, and now you're letting this thing run out of money.' When you're talking about these very vulnerable households, asking folks to pay $30 [a month] or more, you might as well be asking them for $1 million. These households know how to stretch a dollar; $30 is a very high mark."

Rural and older users

The ACP has quickly gained adoption since Congress created the program in the 2021 bipartisan infrastructure law. It is [*overwhelmingly popular*](https://digitalprogress.tech/acp-poll2024/) with both political parties, surveys show.

Military families account for almost half of the ACP's subscriber base, according to [*the White House*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/02/06/fact-sheet-as-affordable-connectivity-program-hits-milestone-of-providing-affordable-high-speed-internet-to-23-million-households-nationwide-biden-harris-administration-calls-on-congress-t/?utm_campaign=Newsletters&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sendgrid) and an [*outside survey*](https://www.bsgco.com/acp-fact-sheet) backed by Comcast.

One of those military recipients is Walter Durham, a 68-year-old Navy vet who lives in San Diego and uses the internet to talk to his doctors. He says he relies on the $30 monthly savings on internet to afford healthier foods.

"I'm going to have to either do without Wi-Fi or I will have to come up with other means to pay for Wi-Fi," Durham told CNN, "because I can't count on the politicians to do anything to help the American people."

More than a quarter of ACP users live in rural areas, the Comcast-backed survey said, with roughly 4 in 10 enrolled households located in the southern United States alone. As many as 65% of respondents said they feared losing their job without the ACP; 3 out of 4 said they worry about losing online health care services, and more than 80% said they believe their kids would fall behind in school.

"One of the things that has been the most surprising is how much the program is over-indexing, is over-performing in rural areas," Starks told CNN.

Large swaths of the ACP's user base trend older; Americans over 65 account for almost 20% of the program. And as many as 10 million Americans who use the program are at least age 50.

Michelle McDonough, 49, works part time at a tobacco shop in Maine and lives off Social Security disability payments. She is one statistics class away from earning an associate degree in behavioral health. Not only does she go to class virtually, but she also sees a psychiatrist who only meets patients through telehealth visits.

Like George, McDonough also expects she'll have to cut back on groceries if the ACP goes away. There's a library roughly five miles from her home with internet access, but having to go out of her way would cost her even more time and money she doesn't have, she said. Besides, McDonough added, her car is dying and the library is rarely open in snowy weather.

If politicians allow the ACP to collapse, it will be a sign of how out of touch they are with their voters, McDonough said.

"I'm trying to become a productive member of society, something that they say people on low income are not," McDonough said. "I'm trying. And, you know, one of the programs that's helping me, they're talking about taking it away - when there are definitely a lot of other things that they probably could take the funding from."

First experiences with home internet

Congress authorized the ACP with an initial $14 billion in funding in 2021. That money has now spread to virtually every congressional district in the country. It is the largest internet affordability program in US history, the government has said, describing it as working hand-in-glove with billions of dollars in new infrastructure spending.

In a recent [*FCC survey*](https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-400836A1.pdf), more than half of rural respondents - and 47% of respondents overall - said the ACP was their first-ever experience with having home internet.

If the ACP collapses, some, like George and McDonough, will make cuts to their budget to stay online.

Kamesha Scott, a 29-year-old mother in St. Louis who works two jobs delivering Amazon packages and handling restaurant takeout orders, told CNN she would have to pick up extra shifts to make ends meet. And that would mean seeing her two kids even less, she said.

Expect others to resort to a mishmash of ad hoc solutions, policy experts say.

That could include using the free Wi-Fi at fast-food restaurants, school parking lots and other public spaces. Or it could mean falling back on cellphone data service, at least where it's available and plans are still affordable.

Roughly a third of the country's 123,000 public libraries offer mobile hotspot lending, allowing visitors to borrow palm-sized devices that pump out a cellular signal that can substitute for home internet service in a pinch, said Megan Janicki, a policy expert at the American Library Association. But they aren't a perfect solution: The cell signal may be weak, or users could have to wait to check one out.

"Depending on how long the waitlist is, they're waiting at least three weeks, if not longer," Janicki said.

ACP subscribers could turn to other government aid. The FCC's [*Lifeline*](https://www.fcc.gov/lifeline-consumers) program, which dates to the Reagan administration, similarly gives low-income households a monthly discount on phone or internet service. But the benefit pales in comparison: It's worth only $9.25 a month, or $34.25 for tribal subscribers - a fraction of what ACP subscribers are currently eligible for.

Bipartisan support - but still no vote

Earlier this year, a bipartisan group of Senate and House lawmakers [*unveiled legislation*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/tech/us-lawmakers-propose-usd7-billion-extension-for-expiring-federal-internet-discounts/index.html) to authorize $7 billion to save the ACP - that's $1 billion more than the Biden administration asked for. That legislation has the support of [*more than half the US House*](https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/6929?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22Affordable+Connectivity+Program+Extension+Act+of+2024%22%7D&s=1&r=2), including 22 Republicans, and five members of the [*US Senate*](https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/3565/text?s=1&r=1&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22Affordable+Connectivity+Program+Extension+Act+of+2024%22%7D), including three Republicans.

Still, the bill has not moved.

Policy experts have said it is unlikely Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson will let the bill onto the House floor as GOP leaders have decried government spending, despite the program being widely supported by members of both parties.

"It is clear the program would be extended if the speaker would allow a vote," said Blair Levin, an analyst at the market research firm New Street Research. "So far, he has not said anything about it, but it appears he will not allow the House to vote on the legislation. He has not, to my knowledge, said anything substantive about the legislation or the program."

A spokesperson for Johnson didn't respond to a request for comment on proposals to renew the ACP.

There is growing evidence that money spent through the ACP ends up saving taxpayers in the long run. In a recent study, [*Levin said,*](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-end-of-the-affordable-connectivity-program-is-almost-here-threatening-to-widen-the-digital-divide/) researchers estimated that every $1 of ACP spending [*increases US GDP*](https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/2311/2311.02431.pdf) by $3.89, while [*other research*](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2800164) has outlined how telemedicine can lead to substantial savings in health care.

Even though extending ACP benefits could help lawmakers from both parties as they head home to campaign, perhaps the biggest political beneficiary may be Biden as his campaign touts the administration's economic record ahead of the election.

Jonathan Blaine, a freelance software engineer in Vermont and an ACP subscriber, pins the blame on certain Republicans who he says would rather hurt working-class people than give Biden a political victory.

"You guys seem to promote that you're for the working-class people, but realistically, the working-class people are the ones that you're screwing over most of the time," Blaine said, speaking directly to GOP lawmakers. "You're taking ACP away from the farmers that can check the local produce prices and be able to reasonably negotiate their prices with retailers. You're removing disabled people's ability to fill their prescriptions online."

Bills like the recent [*government funding legislation*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/23/politics/biden-government-funding-bill-congress/index.html) show that Congress can pass things quickly if it has to, Westman said, lamenting lawmakers' inaction on the ACP.

"[If] both parties agree, there should be zero resistance and this should have been done yesterday instead of people fearing that they're losing this funding," she said.

Correction: This story has been updated to correct the population of Eureka. It is 5,100.

By Brian Fung and Jason Carroll, CNN

TM & © 2024 Cable News Network, Inc., a Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

**Load-Date:** May 14, 2024

**End of Document**