



A report to the
Governor
President of the Senate
Speaker of the House of Representatives



December 2022

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List of Acronyms

ACP	Affordable Connectivity Program
C.F.R.	Code of Federal Regulations
DCF	Department of Children and Families
EBB	Emergency Broadband Benefit
ETC	Eligible Telecommunications Carrier
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FPSC	Florida Public Service Commission
F.S.	Florida Statutes
GB	Gigabytes
Mbps	Megabits per second
NARUC	National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners
NCPW	National Consumer Protection Week
RDOF	Rural Digital Opportunity Fund
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly Food Stamps)
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
USAC	Universal Service Administrative Company
U.S.C.	United States Code
USF	Universal Service Fund

Executive Summary

The Florida Lifeline Assistance report is prepared pursuant to the requirements in Section 364.10, Florida Statutes (F.S.). The Florida Public Service Commission (FPSC or Commission) is required to report to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives each year on the number of customers subscribing to Lifeline service and the effectiveness of procedures to promote participation in the program.

The Lifeline program is designed to enable low-income households to obtain and maintain basic telephone and broadband services by offering qualifying households a discount on their monthly bills. Alternatively, consumers can choose to receive monthly wireless minutes and/or measured data service from certain wireless providers. This report presents Lifeline participation data from July 2021 through June 2022, and evaluates procedures put in place to strengthen the Lifeline program.

As of June 30, 2022, there were 300,285 Florida households participating in the Lifeline program. This represents approximately 1 of every 29 Florida households, which is a 10 percent increase in participation from the previous reporting period.¹ The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) continues to be the largest qualifying program for Lifeline assistance in Florida. However, only 18 percent of SNAP participants subscribe to Lifeline as of June 2022.² Using SNAP participation as a proxy for the number of Lifeline eligible households suggests that there continues to be significant growth opportunities for Lifeline enrollment. However, it should be noted that only carriers that have been designated as an eligible telecommunications carrier (ETC) are permitted to provide the Lifeline discount. If a customer's preferred carrier is not an ETC, they may be less likely to participate in the program if it requires switching providers.

“*Stay Connected Florida!*” was the slogan for Florida's 2022 Lifeline Awareness Week, held on September 12-16. This year's Lifeline Awareness Week continued efforts to increase awareness and enrollment in the Lifeline program.

¹ Florida Legislature Office of Economic and Demographic Research, Demographic Estimating Conference, Florida Households, released on July 18, 2022, <http://edr.state.fl.us/Content/conferences/population/ConferenceResults.pdf>, accessed on October 14, 2022, p. 3, Number of Households: 8,823,920.

² Florida DCF, Access Florida: Standard Data Reports, <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/access/StandardDataReports.asp>, accessed on October 14, 2022.

I. Lifeline Program

The Lifeline program has provided phone service discounts for qualifying low-income consumers since 1985. The Lifeline program would later be codified with the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Initially, the program goal was to ensure that all Americans had the opportunity and security that basic phone service provides. Over time, that goal has evolved to include broadband service.

One of the principles of the universal service program as described in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 is for low-income consumers to have reasonably comparable access to telecommunications and information services.³ The federal universal service Lifeline program is designed to ensure that low-income households have access to modern communications networks capable of providing voice and broadband service.⁴ The program supports the goal of universal service by requiring ETCs to offer a monthly discount for services to qualifying low-income households. Qualifying households can receive up to a \$9.25 discount on their monthly phone or broadband bills from wireline service providers that have been designated as ETCs. Alternatively, consumers can choose to receive monthly wireless minutes and/or measured data service from designated wireless ETCs. Although some of Florida's wireless ETCs offer a free cell phone along with Lifeline service, the distribution of wireless devices is not funded by the Lifeline program.

Support for the Lifeline program comes from the federal Universal Service Fund (USF), which also provides funding for the high-cost, rural healthcare, and schools and libraries programs. Lifeline is available to eligible low-income households in every state and territory, as well as federally recognized Tribal lands.

The rules governing the Lifeline program are established by the FCC; however, the FCC has designated the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC), an independent not-for-profit corporation, as the program's administrator. USAC is responsible for data collection, maintenance, support calculation, and disbursement of support for the Lifeline program along with other federal USF programs. USAC also administers the National Verifier, which determines customer eligibility for the Lifeline discount. The FPSC has oversight over the Lifeline program in Florida pursuant to Section 364.10, F.S.

Eligibility

Consumers can qualify to participate in the Lifeline program either through program-based or income-based eligibility standards. Program-based eligibility is determined by a customer's enrollment in specific qualifying programs. Customers can qualify for the Lifeline program by being enrolled in any one of the following programs:

- SNAP
- Medicaid

³ 47 U.S.C. § 254(b)(3).

⁴ FCC, Third Report and Order, WC Docket No. 11-42, FCC 11-42 released on April 27, 2016, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-16-38A1.pdf>, accessed on November 1, 2022.

- Federal Public Housing Assistance
- Supplemental Security Income
- Veterans or Survivors Pension Program
- Bureau of Indian Affairs Programs: Tribal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Head Start Subsidy, and National School Lunch Program

Consumers whose total household income is less than 135 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines can participate in the Lifeline program under the income-based standard. The Federal Poverty Guidelines are updated annually by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.⁵ Consumers can enroll in the Lifeline program through income-based eligibility by providing qualifying documentation to the National Verifier.

Application Process

Consumers have several methods by which they can apply to receive Lifeline benefits:

- Through USAC’s website using the National Verifier consumer portal
- In person with certain ETCs using the National Verifier service provider portal
- By mailing their application to USAC’s Lifeline Support Center
- Through ETC websites that have access to the National Verifier

The eligibility of applications are validated by the National Verifier through available automated eligibility data sources. Applications are checked to confirm identity, verify that the consumer is not already a Lifeline participant, and ensure compliance with all program rules. If eligibility cannot be validated through automated sources, customers can upload supporting documentation to the National Verifier portal or mail it to the Lifeline Support Center. Those that qualify must then contact a participating provider in their area to enroll in the Lifeline program.

In Florida, USAC’s National Verifier is connected to the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) database to confirm customer eligibility through SNAP and Medicaid. Nationally, the National Verifier is also connected to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.⁶ For states like Florida where both federal and state databases confirm eligibility, USAC estimates that the automated eligibility pass rate is about 70 percent.⁷

Minimum Service Standards

To be eligible for USF support, ETC’s are required to provide broadband access that meets minimum service standards established by the FCC, unless they are granted forbearance from

⁵ Appendix A.

⁶ USAC, Eligibility Verification, <https://www.usac.org/lifeline/national-verifier/eligibility-verification/>, accessed on November 29, 2022. Florida also benefits from both a federal and state connection for Medicaid verification.

⁷ USAC, Annual Report, released on January 31, 2022, <https://www.usac.org/wp-content/uploads/lifeline/documents/nv/reports/National-Verifier-Annual-Report-and-Data-January-2022.pdf>, accessed on October 14, 2022, p. 8.

this obligation. These standards are reviewed annually through an FCC update mechanism to ensure that Lifeline customers continue to receive viable service options as technology improves.⁸ The minimum service standards that will become effective December 1, 2022, include:

- Mobile voice remains unchanged at 1,000 minutes per month
- Mobile broadband usage remains unchanged at 4.5 gigabytes (GB) per month
- Fixed broadband speed remains unchanged at 25 megabits per second (Mbps) downstream and 3 Mbps upstream, while data usage increases from 1.23 to 1.28 terabytes per month

Duplicate Lifeline Support

Eligible consumers can only receive one Lifeline-supported service per household.⁹ If there are two households residing at one address and each desire to participate in the Lifeline program, each applicant must complete USAC's Household Worksheet form. This form is used to demonstrate that each applicant is living in a separate economic unit and not sharing income or living expenses (bills, food, etc.) with another resident.¹⁰

To prevent waste in the program, the FCC created a National Lifeline Accountability Database and mandated its use to ensure that multiple ETCs do not seek and receive reimbursement for the same Lifeline subscriber.¹¹ The National Lifeline Accountability Database conducts a nationwide real-time check to determine if the consumer or another person at the address of the consumer is already receiving Lifeline service. States have read-only access to this database to help prevent waste, fraud, and abuse of the Lifeline program.

Non-Usage Rule

In general, wireless ETCs offer Lifeline service for no additional cost beyond the support provided by the universal service program. While customers can elect to purchase additional minutes or data usage at their discretion, the program pays ETCs to provide a basic level of service. To address potential waste that could occur if support is received for cell phones that are no longer functional or that may have been owned by a customer who is now deceased, the FCC has established rules regarding support for Lifeline connections with no usage. Specifically, if an ETC does not assess or collect a monthly fee from the customer over and above the support received from USF, the Lifeline customer must use the Lifeline-supported service at least once every 30 days. Usage is defined by the FCC as the customer completing one of the following:

- Completing an outgoing call or using data
- Sending a text message
- Buying minutes or data to add to the subscriber's service plan

⁸ FCC, Public Notice, DA 22-800, WC Docket No. 11-42, released on July 29, 2022, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-22-800A1.pdf>, accessed on October 14, 2022.

⁹ 47 C.F.R. § 54.409(c).

¹⁰ A household eligibility pre-screening tool is available at www.lifelinesupport.org, accessed October 14, 2022.

¹¹ FCC, Report and Order, WC Docket No. 11-42, FCC 12-11, released on February 6, 2012, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-12-11A1.pdf>, accessed on October 14, 2022.

- Answering an incoming call (calls from the customer's Lifeline service provider, Lifeline service customer's agent, or representative do not apply)
- Responding to direct contact from the customer's Lifeline service provider to confirm the subscriber wants to continue receiving Lifeline service

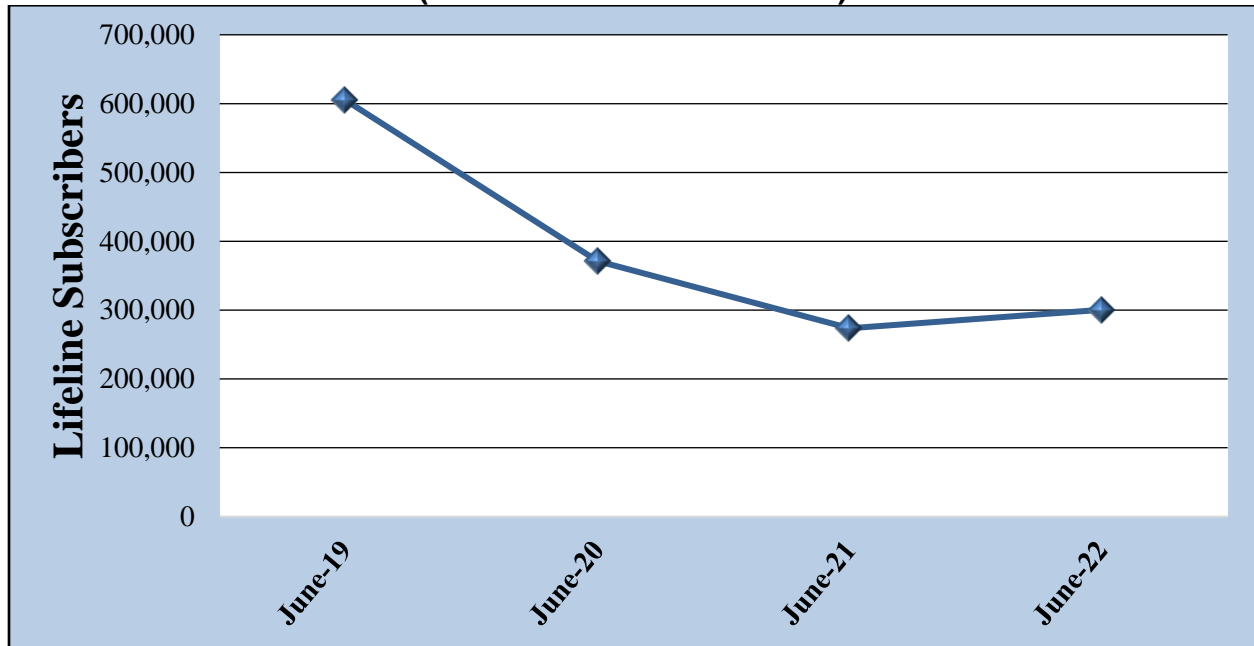
If the Lifeline customer does not use their service for 30 consecutive days (non-usage), the ETC must give the customer a 15-day notice that if they do not use the service in a further 15 days, their service will be terminated. ETCs must de-enroll those Lifeline customers who do not meet the usage requirement within the final 15-day grace period. Consumers de-enrolled from the Lifeline program for non-usage may reapply at any time by submitting an application to USAC. Recent waivers relating to the FCC's non-usage rules are discussed in Chapter IV.

II. Lifeline Participation

Participation

There were 300,285 subscribers enrolled in Lifeline as of June 30, 2022, representing a roughly 10 percent increase from the number of subscribers last year. Figure 1 shows annual Lifeline subscribership for June 2019 through June 2022. During the 2021-2022 reporting period, Lifeline subscribership increased by 26,644. This is the first increase in Lifeline subscribership since 2018. The majority of these new Lifeline customers (99.7 percent) were enrolled by wireless providers, as noted in Appendix B. Almost all wireline companies experienced a loss in Lifeline subscribers, which was attributed by some of these companies to the continued transition of customers to wireless service. The six ETCs that experienced Lifeline subscriber growth in 2022 were: Assurance, SafeLink, T-Mobile, Smart City, WOW!, and Windstream.

Figure 1
Florida Lifeline Subscribership
(For Fiscal Years 2019-2022)



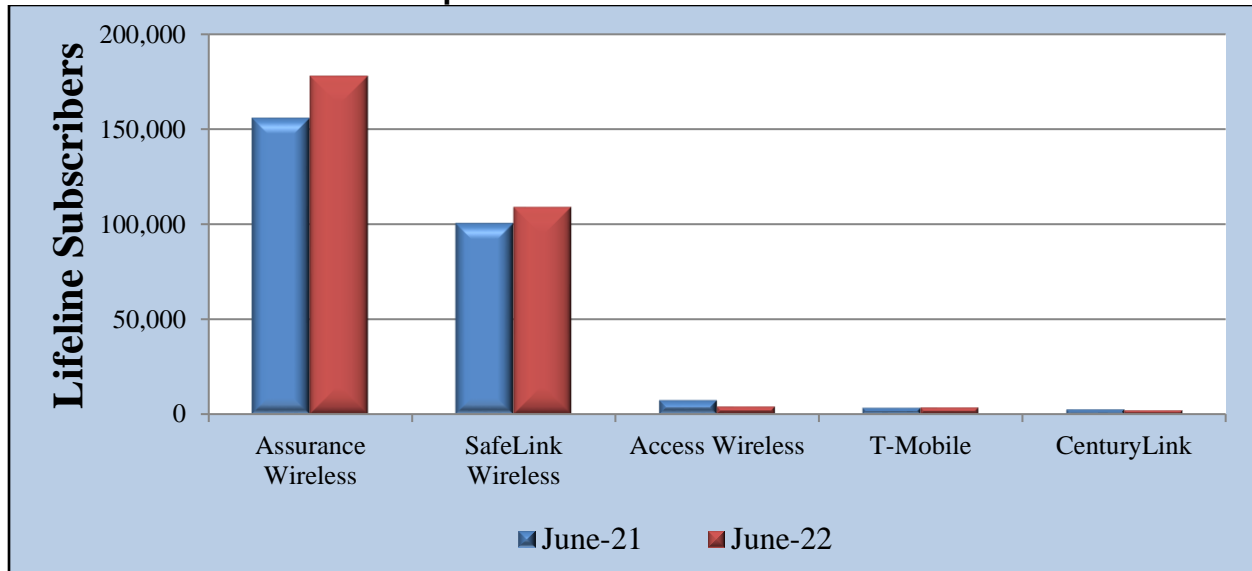
Source: Industry Responses to FPSC Data Requests (2019-2022) and USAC

Figure 1 reflects sharp declines in Lifeline subscribers during the last two reporting periods. This is largely due to an FCC order to comply with non-usage rules that resulted in a significant number of customers being de-enrolled in September 2019, as well as the expiration of the FCC's COVID-related Lifeline non-usage rule waiver on April 30, 2021. A significant drop in subscribers was observed in June 2021, while participation throughout the remainder of the fiscal year appeared constant. Some of the increase seen in fiscal year 2021-2022 may be related to those consumers re-applying for the program.

Figure 2 shows the five Florida ETCs with the most Lifeline subscribers for June 2021 and 2022. Assurance Wireless remains the ETC with the highest number of Lifeline subscribers, with an increase of 22,134 Lifeline subscribers in Florida from June 2021 to June 2022. SafeLink

Wireless, the second largest Lifeline provider, had an increase of 8,665 Lifeline subscribers. For fiscal year 2021-2022, these two largest Lifeline providers represented 96 percent of the Florida Lifeline market.

Figure 2
Top Five Florida Lifeline ETCs



Source: Industry Responses to 2022 FPSC Data Requests and USAC

Table 1 compares the number of households enrolled in Lifeline with the estimated number of Lifeline eligible households based upon SNAP participation. Using SNAP participation as a proxy for the number of Lifeline eligible households suggests there are still significant growth opportunities for Lifeline enrollment. However, it should be noted that only carriers that have been designated as an ETC are permitted to recover the Lifeline discount from the USF. If a customer’s preferred carrier is not an ETC, they may be less likely to participate in the program if it requires switching providers. This is especially true when a customer is required to pay an early contract termination fee to make such a switch.

Table 1
Lifeline Participation Rate in Eligible Florida Households

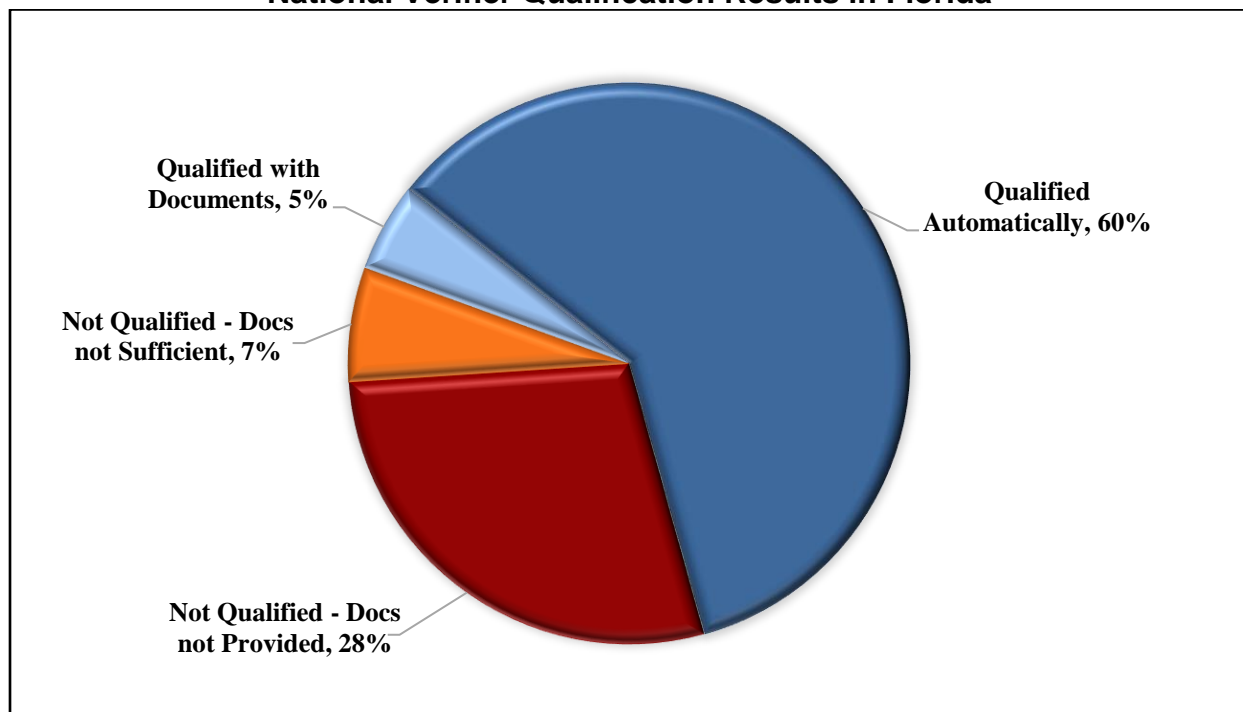
Year	Lifeline Enrollment	Eligible Households	Percent Participation Rate
June 2018	694,647	1,655,134	41.97%
June 2019	604,693	1,540,682	39.25%
June 2020	371,180	2,151,503	17.25%
June 2021	273,641	1,882,842	14.53%
June 2022	300,285	1,590,216	18.88%

Source: Florida DCF, Access Florida: Standard Data Tables

While there was an increase in subscribership during fiscal year 2021-2022, the number of Lifeline eligible households decreased by 292,626.¹² As a result, the participation rate as of June 2022 grew to 18.88 percent. The current participation rate in the Lifeline program in Florida compared to the number of Lifeline eligible households, however, demonstrates the continued need for Lifeline outreach.

For fiscal year 2021-2022, the National Verifier received 1,350,474 applications from Florida. Figure 3 illustrates that 60 percent of these applications qualified automatically via qualifying program database connections that USAC has established with DCF and other federal agencies. By comparison, only 5 percent qualified through manual documentation review. While there was little change between the percentage of manually approved applications from last year, this year's automated verification process increased 8 percent. Among the applications submitted, 35 percent did not qualify because they did not meet the program criteria or were not able to prove their eligibility within 45 days.

Figure 3
National Verifier Qualification Results in Florida



Source: USAC Lifeline Program Data (3Q 2021 to 2Q 2022)

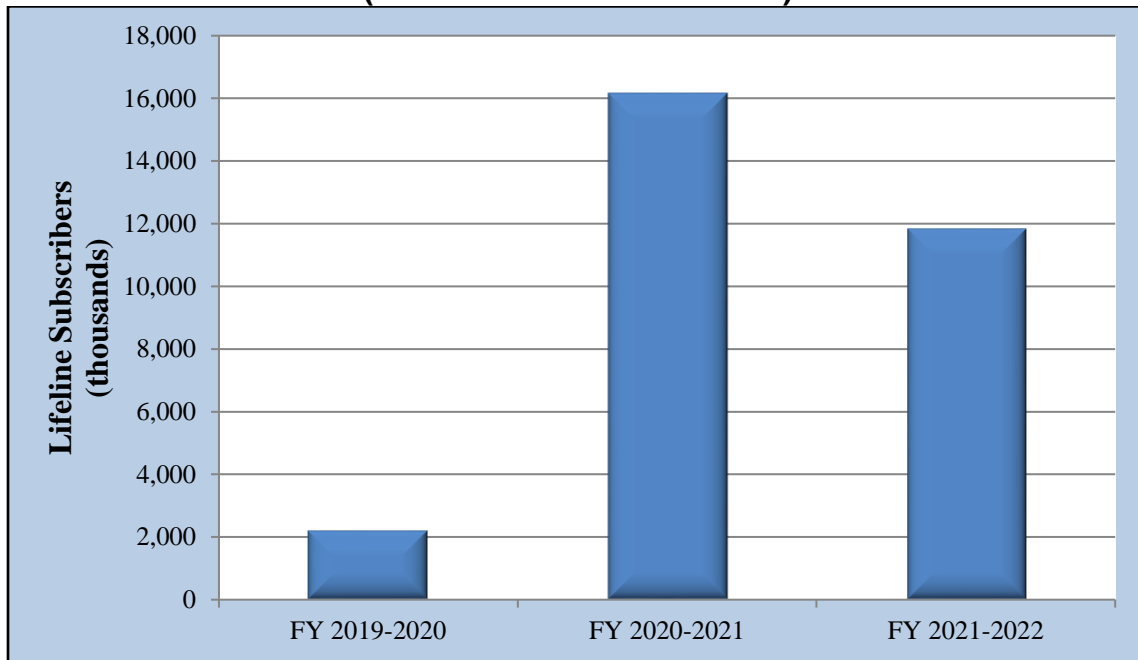
Transitional Lifeline

Transitioning from the Lifeline program usually occurs when a customer's socio-economic status has improved, thus advancing them beyond the qualifying eligibility criteria. As required by Section 364.105, F.S., customers who no longer qualify for Lifeline are eligible to receive a 30 percent discount on the residential basic local service rate for one year. For example, a former Lifeline customer with a \$25 phone bill would receive a \$7.50 monthly discount for one year.

¹² Florida DCF, Access Florida: Standard Data Reports, <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/access/StandardDataReports.asp>, accessed on November, 2, 2022.

Figure 4 represents the average monthly number of Transitional Lifeline customers of Florida ETCs from fiscal year 2019-2020, through fiscal year 2021-2022. This fiscal year, the average number of monthly customers receiving the Transitional Lifeline benefit was 11,835, which represents a decrease in the number of average monthly customers by 4,327 compared to the prior fiscal year.

Figure 4
Average Monthly Transitional Lifeline Participants
(For Fiscal Years 2019-2022)



Source: Industry Responses to FPSC Data Requests (2019-2022)

Rather than offer a transitional discount, to comply with Section 364.105, F.S., TracFone offers its former Lifeline customers at least a 30 percent increase on the customer's chosen prepaid wireless service card. TracFone does not track Transitional Lifeline customers participating in this manner and, therefore, is not included in Figure 4. Additionally, T-Mobile did not respond to staff's data request concerning Transitional Lifeline and is likewise not included in Figure 4.

III. Lifeline Providers

Congress has granted state commissions the authority to designate carriers as ETCs if they meet certain requirements.¹³ Conversely, state commissions may rescind ETC designation should a company fail to follow the Lifeline program requirements. In instances where a state commission lacks jurisdiction to grant ETC status, the FCC may make the designation. To qualify as an ETC, a telecommunications carrier must offer services supported by federal USF program.¹⁴ The carrier must advertise the availability of such services and charges. The services can be provided either using its own facilities or a combination of its own facilities and another carrier's resold service. A company applying for designation as an ETC must demonstrate good management and legitimate business practices to successfully provide Lifeline service.¹⁵

When the Telecommunications Act of 1996 was initially implemented, all ETCs were eligible to participate in the high-cost program and were required to offer Lifeline services. Since then, the FCC has revised its rules to allow companies to request ETC designation to participate in the Lifeline program only and forgo participation in the high-cost programs, which have evolved to include buildout requirements. Currently, the FPSC only evaluates wireline ETC applications. Applications by wireless carriers in Florida are evaluated by the FCC.¹⁶ Table 2 shows the 15 companies that were ETCs and participated in the Lifeline program in Florida as of June 30, 2022. Appendix B provides Lifeline enrollment figures for each ETC between 2019 and 2022.

Table 2
ETCs Participating in Florida

Access Wireless (i-wireless)	Phone Club Corporation
Assurance Wireless (T-Mobile)	SafeLink Wireless (TracFone)
Blue Stream Fiber (ITS)	Smart City Telecom
CenturyLink	TDS (Quincy Telephone Company)
Consolidated Communications (GTC)	T-Mobile
Frontier Communications of the South	Windstream
Frontier Florida, LLC	WOW! (Knology of Florida, Inc.)
NEFCOM (Northeast Florida Telephone Co.)	

Source: Industry Responses to 2022 FPSC Data Requests

T-Mobile ETC Relinquishment Petition

On September 1, 2022, T-Mobile submitted a petition to the FCC to relinquish its ETC status in Florida.¹⁷ If approved, T-Mobile will no longer offer Lifeline services in Florida. However, Assurance Wireless, which is a subsidiary of T-Mobile, will retain its ETC designation and continue to offer Lifeline services in the same coverage area as T-Mobile. T-Mobile acquired Assurance Wireless, Florida's largest Lifeline provider, during the T-Mobile/Sprint merger in

¹³ 47 U.S.C. § 214(e)(2).

¹⁴ 47 C.F.R. § 54.101.

¹⁵ 47 C.F.R. § 54.201(h).

¹⁶ In 2011, the Florida Legislature passed HB 1231, removing FPSC authority to designate wireless ETC providers. Effective July 1, 2012, wireless providers must directly apply for Florida ETC designation with the FCC.

¹⁷ T-Mobile, Petition, released on September 1, 2022, <https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/document/10901624823364/1>, accessed on October 14, 2022.

2020.¹⁸ T-Mobile has requested an effective date of December 31, 2022, for ETC relinquishment.

Lifeline Service Obligations by Technology

ETCs can meet their Lifeline service obligations either through offering voice, broadband, or a combination of both services. Table 3 shows the percent of Lifeline subscription by service type and by type of underlying carrier. Currently, incumbent and competitive wireline carriers meet their Lifeline obligation predominantly through the provision of voice services. By comparison, wireless ETCs primarily offer bundled services that meet the federal standards for both voice and broadband. Two of the four wireless ETCs continue to provide voice-only service. Two and a half percent of SafeLink’s customer base for 2022 includes voice-only service. These customers use 3G cellphones that will be phased out by the end of 2022.¹⁹ Voice-only service is not offered to new Lifeline customers by SafeLink. T-Mobile currently offers a “Basic Rate Plan” service that does not include data.²⁰ Eligible customers may alternatively apply their discount towards any of T-Mobile’s other more expensive publicly available service plans. Appendix C provides percentage of Lifeline subscriptions by service type for each carrier.

Table 3
Lifeline Subscription by Service Type
(As of June 2022)

Carrier Type	Voice	Broadband	Bundled
Wireless	1.1%	14.4%	84.5%
Incumbent Wireline	65.8%	12.2%	22.0%
Competitive Wireline	66.8%	27.0%	6.2%

Source: USAC Disbursements Florida

Wireless Service Standards

All wireless ETCs in Florida meet the minimum FCC standards by offering either a minimum of 1,000 voice minutes or 4.5 GB of data to Lifeline subscribers. While wireless carriers only have to meet either the voice or the data standard, carriers frequently offer some voice or data along with the service that meets the FCC’s standard. Table 4 outlines different Lifeline services currently offered by wireless ETCs in Florida and how they qualify with the federal standards. Plans offered by Access Wireless, Assurance, and SafeLink are fully covered by the Lifeline subsidy, at no cost to the Lifeline consumer. Customers of these companies only have to pay for additional voice minutes or data beyond their phone plan as needed. By comparison, T-Mobile’s Lifeline customers can apply the discount to any of its plans, with the customer responsible for

¹⁸ FCC, Memorandum Opinion and Order, WT Docket No. 18-197, FCC 19-103, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-19-103A1.pdf>, accessed September 21, 2021.

¹⁹ FCC, Consumer Guide, <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/plan-ahead-phase-out-3g-cellular-networks-and-service#:~:text=Verizon%20announced%20that%20it%20will,as%20of%20June%2030%2C%202022>, accessed on October 19, 2022.

²⁰ T-Mobile, Questions about T-Mobile Lifeline?, <https://www.t-mobile.com/offers/lifeline-program>, accessed on November 1, 2022.

any additional costs. T-Mobile’s service qualifications listed in Table 4 are for its least-cost “Basic Rate Plan” at \$20 per month.²¹

Table 4
Lifeline Wireless Qualification Standard by Carrier
(As of September 2022)

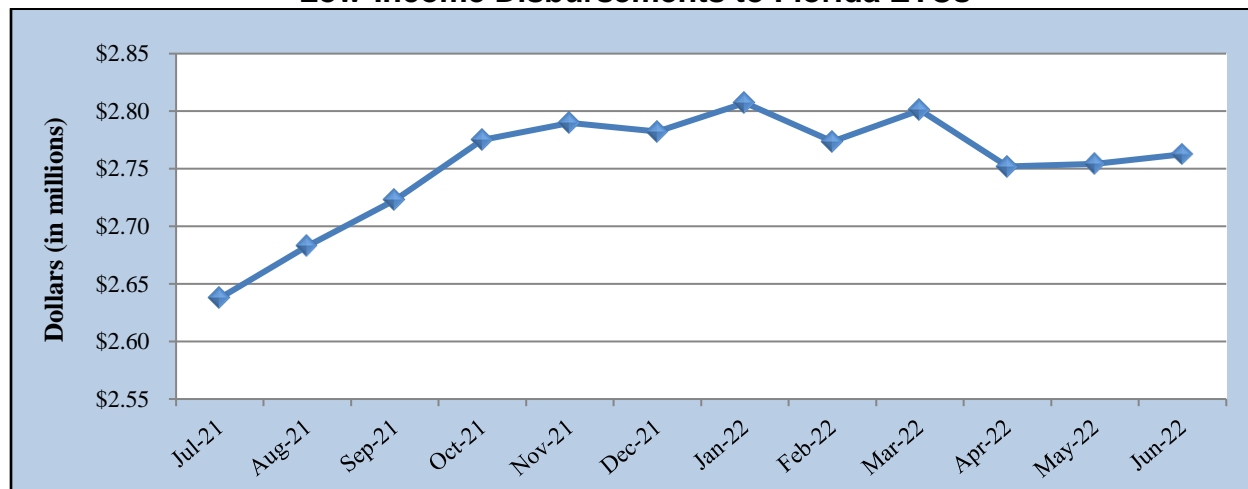
Wireless ETC	Federal Standards Met	Voice	Data
Access Wireless	Voice/Data	1,000 Minutes	4.5 GB
Assurance	Voice/Data	1,000 Minutes	4.5 GB
SafeLink	Data	350 Minutes	4.5 GB
T-Mobile	Voice	Unlimited	No Data

Source: Wireless ETC’s websites

Funding Distributions

Figure 5 reflects USAC Lifeline disbursements to ETCs in Florida during fiscal year 2021-2022. The total amount disbursed during these 12 months was \$33,041,313, with an average of \$2.75 million per month. These amounts also include prior period support corrections. From July to November 2021, an increase of \$150K in disbursements can be observed. This may have occurred as a result of customers being involuntarily de-enrolled after the FCC’s COVID-related non-usage waiver ended on May 1, 2021, and consumers reapplying for the program afterwards.

Figure 5
Low-Income Disbursements to Florida ETCs



Source: USAC Disbursements Florida July 2021-June 2022, w/ amended data for SafeLink and Assurance Wireless

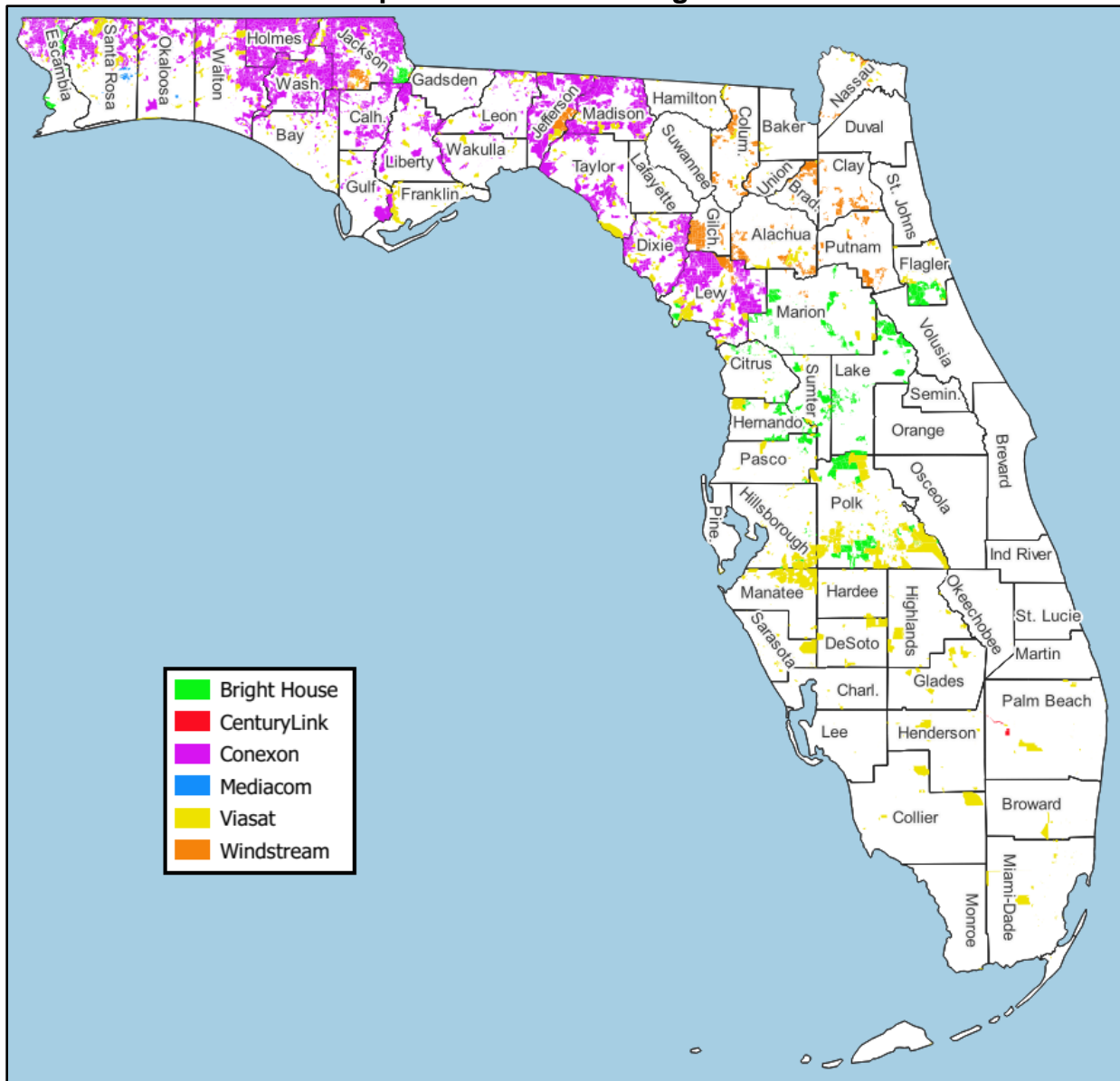
Recent ETC Designations

Florida has seen an increase in carriers applying either to the FPSC or the FCC to acquire ETC status in order to receive support from the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF). The RDOF

²¹ Ibid.

is a form of high-cost support that will award funding over 10-years to build out broadband capable networks in unserved areas.²² During 2021 and 2022, three new companies were granted ETC status (Bright House, Conexon Connect, and Mediacom), and two expanded their exiting ETC service area (CenturyLink and Windstream). In addition to certain buildout requirements that are conditional upon receiving RDOF support, these ETCs are required to provide Lifeline service to at least 40 percent of their newly designated areas by December 2025. Figure 6 identifies the areas where new Lifeline ETC designations have been assigned to carriers. These ETC designations are discussed further in Chapter IV.

Figure 6
Map of Recent ETC Designations



Source: USAC Census Data

²² USAC, Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, <https://www.usac.org/high-cost/funds/rural-digital-opportunity-fund/>, accessed on September 20, 2022.

In 2019, the FCC granted Viasat, a satellite broadband company, ETC status in select areas in Florida to receive a different form of high-cost support.²³ Viasat is expected to have finished upgrading its network and be ready to provide Lifeline services in at least 40 percent of its designated service area by December 2022.²⁴

²³ FCC, Order, WC 10-90, DA 19-925, released on September 18, 2019, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-19-925A1.pdf>, accessed on October 20, 2022.

²⁴ 47 C.F.R. § 54.310(c).

IV. Regulatory Activities and Updates

A. Federal Communications Commission Activities

Phase Out of Voice-Only Support

On April 27, 2016, the FCC released its Lifeline Modernization Order.²⁵ This Order was primarily established to modernize the Lifeline program by including broadband as a supported service, designating minimum service standards for Lifeline services, and establishing the National Verifier. Implementation of this Order continues to have an impact on the federal Lifeline program.

In the Order, the FCC established a timeline to gradually phase out support for voice-only services to further its goal of transitioning to a broadband-focused Lifeline program. On December 1, 2019, the support provided for voice-only services was reduced to \$7.25 per Lifeline customer. Support for voice-only Lifeline service was scheduled to be completely phased out on December 1, 2021. However, the FCC has twice delayed the complete phase out of voice-only Lifeline support. Pursuant to its most recent Order, support for voice-only Lifeline services will continue to be available through November 30, 2023.²⁶ In this Order, the FCC stated that new data from its Communications Marketplace Report, and other extenuating circumstances, have provided evidence that favors pausing the phase-down. Therefore, support for voice-only Lifeline service will remain at \$5.25 until that time. Broadband services that include a voice service will continue to be eligible to receive Lifeline support after the new phase-out date. Table 5 outlines the FCC's revised phase down schedule.

Table 5
Lifeline Support Transition Schedule

Effective Dates	Fixed Voice	Mobile Voice	Fixed Broadband	Mobile Broadband
From 12/1/19 to 11/30/20	\$7.25	\$7.25	\$9.25	\$9.25
From 12/1/20 to 11/30/23	\$5.25	\$5.25	\$9.25	\$9.25
After 11/30/23	\$0	\$0	\$9.25	\$9.25

Source: FCC 2016 Lifeline Modernization Order (FCC 16-38)

The FPSC filed comments with the FCC asserting that customers should continue to receive Lifeline support for voice-only service and that the FCC should eliminate its planned phase down of support.²⁷ The FPSC noted its concern that if the only option to obtain Lifeline voice service is by combining the service with broadband, the cost of the combined services may become cost prohibitive for some consumers, without increasing financial support from the Lifeline program. The shift in support offered for voice-only support appears to have continued to cause a shift in

²⁵ FCC, Third Report and Order, FCC 16-38, WC Docket No. 11-42, released on April 27, 2016, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-16-38A1.pdf>, accessed on October 14, 2022.

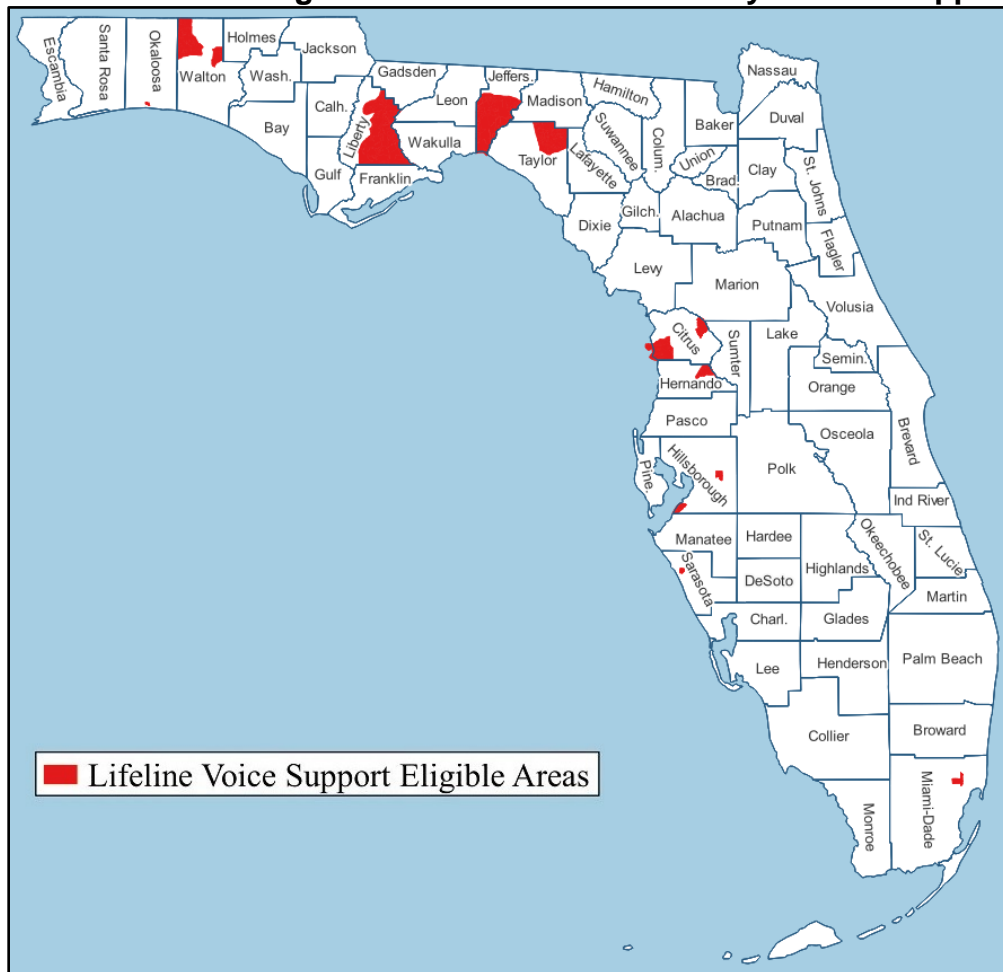
²⁶ FCC, Order, DA 22-706, WC Docket No. 11-42, released on July 1, 2022, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-22-706A1.pdf>, accessed on October 14, 2022.

²⁷ FPSC, Comments to FCC, WC Docket No. 17-287, filed on February 21, 2018, <https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/document/1022171092868/1>, accessed on October 14, 2021.

Florida's ETC service offerings to focus on broadband and bundled voice and broadband services.²⁸ Once voice-only support is phased out, ETCs that exclusively offer voice-only Lifeline service will likely relinquish their ETC designations.

The 2016 Lifeline Modernization Order included an exception to the complete phase-down of voice-only support in census blocks where there is only one Lifeline provider. On June 2, 2021, the FCC released a public notice identifying the census blocks eligible to continue receiving the \$5.25 support amount for voice-only Lifeline service.²⁹ The list of eligible census blocks will be evaluated annually by the FCC and will continue through November 30 of the year that an eligible census block is identified as being served by more than one Lifeline provider. In Florida, 4,389 census blocks qualify for the continued voice-only support. The FCC has not updated the census block data since the complete phase-down of voice-only support was postponed. Figure 7 highlights the areas eligible to continue receiving voice-only support.

Figure 7
Areas in Florida Eligible for Continued Voice-Only Lifeline Support



Source: FCC, Shapefile by Census Tracts

²⁸ See Appendixes B and C.

²⁹ FCC, Public Notice, DA 21-640, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-21-640A1.pdf>, accessed on October 14, 2022.

Emergency Broadband Benefit Program

On December 27, 2020, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 became law, establishing the Emergency Broadband Connectivity Fund consisting of \$3.2 billion from the United States Treasury being allocated towards helping Americans afford Internet service during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Emergency Broadband Benefit program (EBB) was established to provide funding for low-income households to receive a discount on the cost of broadband and certain connected devices. The fund allowed eligible service providers to apply for an expedited approval process to participate in the program; not to be confused with the ETC application process, since approved providers were not given ETC status. The EBB offered a discount of up to \$50 a month on broadband service and associated equipment rentals, as well as a one-time discount of up to \$100 for qualifying broadband access devices.³⁰

Affordable Connectivity Program

On December 31, 2021, the FCC launched the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP).³¹ This program replaced the EBB program. During the transition, the over 9 million households fully enrolled in the EBB Program as of December 31, 2021, continued to receive their current monthly benefit until March 1, 2022. The ACP provides a discount of up to \$30 per month toward Internet service for households that are eligible. Those eligible can also receive a one-time credit of up to \$100 to purchase a connected device from participating providers, provided they contribute between \$10 and \$50 toward the cost of purchase. Enrollment in the ACP is open for households with at least one member qualifying under the following criteria:

- Income is at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines
- Participates in certain assistance programs, such as Lifeline, SNAP, Medicaid, Federal Public Housing Assistance, SSI, or Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children
- Participates in Tribal specific programs, such as Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations
- Is approved to receive benefits under the free and reduced-price school lunch program or the school breakfast program, including through the United States Department of Agriculture Community Eligibility Provision
- Received a Federal Pell Grant during the current award year
- Meets the eligibility criteria for a participating provider's existing low-income program

The ACP allows consumers to choose the service plan that best meets their needs, without early termination fees if they change providers. Participants can gain broadband access regardless of credit status or prior debt with a broadband provider. Only one monthly service discount and device credit is allowed per household.³² While the ACP is distinct from the Lifeline program,

³⁰ Qualifying broadband access equipment includes laptops, tablets, and desktop computers.

³¹ FCC, FCC News Release, released on January 4, 2022, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-378908A1.pdf>, accessed October 14, 2022.

³² USAC, Affordable Connectivity Program, <https://www.affordableconnectivity.gov/>, accessed on October 14, 2022.

wireless ETCs frequently utilize the ACP to provide broadband capable cellphones to their Lifeline customers.

Lifeline Rule Waivers

On March 17, 2020, the FCC released the first of a series of twelve Orders related to Lifeline rule waivers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.³³ In several of the relating orders, the FCC suspended the non-usage rule, ensuring enrolled consumers would not be removed from the program if they did not meet the FCC usage criteria. The FCC allowed the non-usage waiver period to expire on April 30, 2021.³⁴ By comparison, the FCC's waiver of rules relating to recertification and reverification of eligibility were in effect until September 30, 2022.³⁵ The Lifeline recertification process allows the FCC and USAC to ensure that subscribers receiving the Lifeline benefit continue to be eligible for the program.

On September 28, 2022, Hurricane Ian struck Florida's Gulf Coast, causing catastrophic flooding and power outages to homes and businesses throughout the southwestern region of the state. More than two million people lost power, and the remaining damage is expected to take time to recover. To mitigate the disruption to affected Lifeline consumers, the FCC on its own motion ordered that the Lifeline non-usage, recertification, and reverification requirements for subscribers residing in the affected disaster areas be waived through November 30, 2022.³⁶

B. Florida Public Service Commission Activities

Actions to Prevent Waste, Fraud, and Abuse of the Universal Service Fund

Florida continues to enforce safeguards to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse of the USF. The FPSC strives to protect the integrity of the Lifeline program in Florida and takes appropriate enforcement action when necessary. The FPSC has statutory authority to grant wireline ETC designations and can also revoke ETC status when warranted.

Unlawful and inappropriate federal USF disbursements are inconsistent with public trust and negatively impact all contributors to the fund. This is especially true for states like Florida that contribute more into the USF than it receives. Therefore, the FPSC monitors federal USF disbursements to Florida ETCs to ensure that funds are being disbursed and expended according to state and federal regulations and guidelines.

Lifeline Electronic Coordinated Enrollment Process

In 2007, Florida implemented the Lifeline Electronic Coordinated Enrollment Process. This process involved a computer interface between the FPSC and DCF to process Lifeline applications for people who were approved for the Medicaid and SNAP programs.

³³ USAC, FCC COVID-19 Response, <https://www.usac.org/lifeline/resources/covid-19-response/>, accessed on October 14, 2022.

³⁴ FCC, Order, WC Docket No. 11-42, DA 21-229, released on February 24, 2021, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-21-229A1.pdf>, accessed on October 19, 2022.

³⁵ FCC, Order, WC Docket No. 11-42, DA 22-691, released June, 30, 2022, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-22-691A1.pdf>, accessed on October 19, 2022.

³⁶ FCC, Order, WC Docket No. 11-42, DA 22-1063 released October 4, 2022, <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DA-22-1063A1.pdf>, accessed on October 14, 2022.

Prior to the National Verifier, customers identified through this process would be automatically considered eligible and enrolled in Lifeline service by a selected ETC. However, now that eligibility is determined only by the National Verifier, ETC's must now contact the customer to determine if they have already been approved for the Lifeline program through the National Verifier.

For those customers who have not yet applied for the program, ETCs will either instruct customers on how to apply or assist these customers with their applications in person. If a customer mistakenly identifies an ETC that does not serve the area in which they live, the FPSC sends instructions on how to apply through the National Verifier, along with a list of each ETC's contact information. Between January and November 2022, the FPSC sent 42,601 such letters to eligible households.

Recent ETC Designations

On December 7, 2020, the FCC announced the winning bidders of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) auction. The RDOF is a form of high-cost support intended to help connect millions of unserved rural homes and small businesses to high-speed broadband. In Florida, a total of 11 bidders were selected to receive approximately \$192 million of high-cost support in Phase I. As a condition of receiving funding, the carriers were required to obtain ETC designation that covered their winning bid areas.

Following the completion of the RDOF bidding process, the FPSC evaluated ETC applications for several winning bidders.³⁷ If a company's ETC application is approved, that company would be eligible for high-cost support under the RDOF program, but would also have to offer Lifeline service. While the FPSC has the primary jurisdiction over ETC designation, federal law provides for the FCC to make such designations in instances where a state commission lacks jurisdiction.³⁸ In 2021, the FPSC evaluated six winning RDOF bidders in Florida for ETC designation.³⁹

To be designated as an ETC by the Commission, a carrier must meet the definition of a "telecommunications company" according to Section 364.02(13), F.S.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Section 364.011, F.S., establishes that companies using satellites, wireless technology, and VOIP to provide services are outside of the Commission's jurisdiction. As a result, four ETC petitioners were directed to apply for ETC designation with the FCC. Bright House Networks Information Services (Florida), LLC, and CenturyLink Communications, LLC were found to be carriers within the Commission's jurisdiction, and therefore, designated as ETCs by the FPSC. While federal law requires that carriers designated as ETCs by the FCC abide by all applicable state law, the FPSC has received positive confirmation through data request responses from each of the ETC applicants that Florida Statutes will be adhered to regardless of the designating agency. Because the program provides for an opportunity for carriers to buildout their network, none of these companies have an obligation to offer Lifeline discounts at this time.

³⁷ Starlink Services, LLC, Hotwire Communications Ltd., Bright House Networks Information Services (Florida), LLC, CenturyLink Communications, LLC, Windstream Communications, LLC, and AB Indiana LLC.

³⁸ 47 U.S.C. 54.201

³⁹ See FPSC Docket No.'s 20210011, 20210012, 20210013, 20210047, 20210070, and 20210110.

⁴⁰ FPSC Order No. PSC-2021-0222-PAA-TX, Docket No. 20210013-TX, pp. 3-4.

V. Lifeline Promotion Activities

Promotional activities in 2022 featured National Lifeline Awareness Week and National Consumer Protection Week, and ongoing “grassroots” efforts to increase awareness and enrollment in the Lifeline program.

The FPSC works with state commissions, the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC) and the FCC to promote Lifeline Awareness Week and educate consumers on the nationwide implementation of a consumer-friendly Lifeline National Eligibility Verifier by USAC. The national effort also ensures that low-income families and individuals are aware of the Lifeline program and understand the participation requirements, including annual recertification and one discount per household. The shared goal is for all eligible households to be enrolled and receive Lifeline program benefits.

The FPSC seeks existing community events as well as new venues and opportunities where Lifeline educational materials can be distributed and discussed with consumers. For the past few years, the FPSC has held both virtual and in-person Lifeline events to accommodate many of Florida’s senior and community centers that continue to operate with restrictions.

National Lifeline Awareness Week

NARUC and the FCC have designated the week following Labor Day in September each year as Lifeline Awareness Week. “*Stay Connected Florida!*” was Florida’s slogan for 2022 Lifeline Awareness Week, September 12-16. In addition to increasing awareness among eligible citizens, Lifeline Awareness Week continued educating residents about the discount on voice and broadband services.

This year, Florida’s outreach focused on senior and community centers, area agencies on aging, and housing and neighborhood developments in Columbia, Palm Beach, Alachua, Lee, and Polk Counties. Lifeline information is also readily available on the FPSC’s website.⁴¹

National Consumer Protection Week

National Consumer Protection Week (NCPW), March 6-12, 2022, provided a good opportunity for Lifeline outreach activities. An annual consumer education campaign, NCPW encourages consumers to take advantage of their consumer rights. For more than a decade, the FPSC has joined government agencies, advocacy organizations, and private sector groups nationwide to highlight NCPW.

Chairman Andrew Fay recognized the 24th Annual NCPW by highlighting Lifeline, and raising awareness about online privacy and securing personal information. For NCPW 2022, the FPSC met with consumers at the Jefferson County Senior Citizens Center and the Senior Citizens Council of Madison County.

⁴¹FPSC, Lifeline Assistance Webpage, <http://www.floridapsc.com/ConsumerAssistance/LifelineAssistance>, accessed on November 2, 2022.

Older Americans Month

Each May, the Commission participates in Older Americans Month, a national project to honor and recognize older Americans for their contributions to families, communities, and society. “Age My Way” was this year’s theme. The FPSC partnered with centers in Hamilton, Suwanee, Lafayette, and Leon Counties to meet with seniors in-person and distribute information on Lifeline and utility bill reduction strategies to area seniors. Virtual meetings were held with senior centers in Sarasota, Charlotte, Putnam and DeSoto Counties.

Library Outreach Campaign

Each year the FPSC provides educational packets, including FPSC publications and Lifeline brochures and applications in English and Spanish, to Florida public libraries across the state for consumer distribution. The FPSC’s Library Outreach Campaign reached 617 state public libraries and branches in 2022. To reduce mailing and production costs, the Commission’s 2022 Campaign was accomplished electronically. Following the Campaign, many libraries’ requests for additional publications continue to be filled.

Ongoing Lifeline Outreach

Ensuring easy access to Lifeline information through the agencies and organizations having regular interaction with eligible consumers is crucial to the Lifeline awareness effort. The FPSC partners with many agencies year-round to make sure eligible consumers know about Lifeline and know how to apply. Each month, the FPSC sends a cover letter and informational packet to two organizations to encourage continued Lifeline outreach to their eligible clientele. The FPSC continues to conduct two virtual monthly meetings or train-the-trainer events to promote Lifeline.

Each quarter, the FPSC also names a valued partner agency or organization as a “Helping Hand,” for helping raise public awareness about the Lifeline program, energy and water conservation, and utility impersonation scams. Helping Hands named in 2022 include: City of Doral, Florida Impact to End Hunger, the Friendship Senior Centers, Inc., and the Lifestyle Enrichment Center.

Lifeline Partners

The local, state, and federal agencies, organizations, businesses, and telecommunications companies listed in Appendix D are involved in the collaborative effort to increase awareness and participation in the Lifeline program. These Lifeline Partners have continued to develop new partnerships, participate in local community events, offer training sessions, provide updates about program changes, and supply brochures and applications.

Appendix A 2022 U.S. Poverty Guidelines

Persons in Family/Household	2022 U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines	135% of Federal Poverty Guidelines	Monthly Income at 135% of Federal Poverty Guidelines
1	13,590.00	18,346.50	1,528.88
2	18,310.00	24,718.50	2,059.88
3	23,030.00	31,090.50	2,590.88
4	27,750.00	37,462.50	3,121.88
5	32,470.00	43,834.50	3,652.88
6	37,190.00	50,206.50	4,183.88
7	41,910.00	56,578.50	4,714.88
8	46,630.00	62,950.50	5,245.88

Source: Department of Health and Human Services, Annual Update of the Department of Health and Human Service Poverty Guidelines. Federal Register Notice, January 1, 2022, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/01/21/2022-01166/annual-update-of-the-hhs-poverty-guidelines>, accessed on October 5, 2022.

Appendix B

Lifeline Enrollment and Year-to-Year Net Growth Rate

	ETCs	June 2019	June 2020	Net Growth Rate	June 2021	Net Growth Rate	June 2022	Net Growth Rate
Wireless	Assurance Wireless	411,114	222,128	-46%	155,848	-30%	177,982	14%
	SafeLink Wireless	167,966	130,362	-22%	100,463	-23%	109,128	9%
	Access Wireless	14,795	8,740	-41%	7,566	-13%	4,136	-45%
	T-Mobile	2,489	3,307	33%	3,523	7%	3,608	2%
Incumbent Wireline	CenturyLink	3,875	3,056	-21%	2,652	-13%	2,153	-19%
	Frontier Florida	1,690	1,405	-17%	1,478	5%	1,249	-15%
	Windstream	1,332	1,274	-4%	1,289	1%	1,361	6%
	Consolidated Communications	329	275	-16%	255	-7%	189	-26%
	NEFCOM	221	179	-19%	169	-6%	138	-18%
	TDS Telecom	112	98	-13%	88	-10%	77	-13%
	AT&T	89	70	-21%	58	-17%	0	-100%
	Blue Stream Fiber (ITS)	20	58	190%	37	-36%	30	-19%
	Frontier of the South	19	21	11%	19	-10%	17	-11%
	Smart City	3	4	33%	3	-25%	6	100%
Competitive Wireline	Phone Club	143	158	10%	138	-13%	138	0%
	WOW!	50	45	-10%	55	22%	73	33%
	Cox Telecom	409	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Tele Circuit	37	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	694,647	371,180	-39%	273,641	-26%	300,285	10%

Source: FPSC Data Requests 2019-2022

Appendix C
Percent of Lifeline Subscription by Service Type
(as of June 2022)

	ETCs	Voice	Broadband	Bundled
Wireless	Assurance Wireless	0%	0%	100%
	SafeLink Wireless	2.5%	35.5%	62%
	Access Wireless	0%	0.6%	99.4%
	T-Mobile	7.5%	0.2%	92.3%
Incumbent Wireline	CenturyLink	91.5%	1.8%	6.7%
	Frontier Florida	69.9%	13.1%	17%
	Windstream	18.6%	29.2%	52.2%
	Consolidated Communications	94.9%	4.1%	1.0%
	NEFCOM	56.5%	2.2%	41.3%
	TDS Telecom	79.5%	0%	20.5%
	AT&T	0%	0%	0%
	Blue Stream Fiber (ITS)	13.8%	62.1%	24.1%
	Frontier of the South	66.7%	15.1%	18.2%
	Smart City	16.7%	66.6%	16.7%
Competitive Wireline	Phone Club	100%	0%	0%
	WOW!	4.1%	78.1%	17.8%
	Total	2.2%	14.4%	83.4%

Source: USAC Disbursements in Florida and data request responses from SafeLink and Assurance

Appendix D

Agency, Organization, and Business Lifeline Partners

Florida Lifeline Partners	
1000 Friends of Florida, Inc.	Community Legal Services
A Caring Hand Home Care	Communities In Schools Foster Grandparent Program
AARP–Florida Chapter	Community Legal Services
Ability Housing of Northeast Florida	Community Partnership Group
ACCESS Florida Community Network Partners	Corporation to Develop Communities of Tampa, Inc.
Agency for Health Care Administration	Deaf & Hard of Hearing Services of NW Florida, Inc.
Agency for Persons with Disabilities	Disability Rights Florida
Aging Matters in Brevard County	Elder Options
Aging True Community Senior Services	Elder Source
Aging With Dignity	Faith Radio Station and other Florida radio stations
Aging Solutions, Inc.	Federal Social Security Admin - Tallahassee District
Alliance for Aging, Inc.	Feeding South Florida
America's Second Harvest of the Big Bend, Inc.	First Quality Home Care
Area Agencies on Aging	Florida Alliance for Information and Referral Services
ASPIRE Health Partners	Florida Assisted Living Association
Big Bend 2-1-1 and other 2-1-1 Agencies	Florida Association for Community Action
Boley Centers, Inc.	Florida Association of Community Health Centers
Braille and Talking Book Library	Florida Association of Counties
Brain Injury Association of Florida, Inc.	Florida Association of County Human Service Admin
Bridges at Riviera Beach	Florida Association of the Deaf, Inc.
Bridgeway Center, Inc.	Florida Association of Food Banks
Broward County Elderly & Veterans Services Division	Florida Assn. of Housing & Redevelopment Officials
Bureau of Indian Affairs Programs	Florida Coalition for Children
Capital Area Community Action Agency, Inc.	Florida Coalition for the Homeless
CARES of Florida	Florida Council on Aging
Carrfour Supportive Housing	Florida Deaf Services Centers Association
Catholic Charities of Central Florida	Florida Dept. of Business & Professional Regulation
Center for Hearing and Communication	Florida Department of Children and Families
Centers for Drug Free Living	Florida Department of Economic Opportunity
Centers for Independent Living	Florida Department of Education
Central Florida Community Action Agency	Florida Department of Elder Affairs
City and County Consumer Assistance Departments	Florida Department of Revenue
City and County Consumer Assistance Departments	Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs
City and County Housing Authorities	Florida Developmental Disabilities Council
City and County Social Programs	Florida Elder Care Services
Coalition of Florida Farmworker Organizations, Inc.	Florida Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles
Communities In Schools Foster Grandparent Program	Florida Housing Authorities

Florida Lifeline Partners (continued)	
Florida Home Partnership	NAACP (Florida Associations)
Florida Hospital Association	National Church Residences
Florida Housing Coalition	Nursing Homes Administrators
Florida Housing Finance Corporation	Nu-Hope of Highlands County
Florida League of Cities, Inc.	One-Stop Career Centers
Florida Low Income Housing Associates	Osceola County Corrections Department
Florida Nurses Association	Palm Beach Community Action Agency
Florida Office of Public Counsel	Refuge House of the Big Bend
Florida Ombudsman Program	Second Harvest of the Big Bend
Florida Public Libraries	Seminole County Community Development
Florida Public School Districts	Senior Connection Center, Inc.
Florida Rural Legal Services, Inc.	Senior Friendship Centers
Florida Senior Medicare Patrol	Senior Medicare Patrol
Florida Senior Program	Senior Resource Alliance
Florida Telecommunications Relay, Inc.	Senior Solutions
Florida Voters League	Seniors First
Good News Outreach	SHINE Program
Goodwill Industries of Central Florida	South East American Council, Inc.
Habitat for Humanity – Florida	Tallahassee Memorial Hospital
HANDS of Central Florida	Tallahassee Urban League
Hemophilia Foundation of Greater Florida	Tampa Vet Center
Hispanic Office for Local Assistance	Three Rivers Legal Services, Inc.
HOPE Community Center	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
HOPE Connection	United Home Care Services
League for the Hard of Hearing	United Way of Florida
Leon County School Board	Urban Jacksonville
Little Havana Activities and Nutrition Centers	Urban Leagues of Florida
Living Stones Native Circle	Wakulla County Senior Citizens Council
Marion Senior Services	Walton County Council on Aging
Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida	Washington County Council on Aging
Mid-Florida Housing Partnership, Inc.	We Care-Jacksonville
Monroe County Social Services	