California Public Utilities Commission
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CPUC Approves Permanent Disaster Protections for California LifeLine Customers

New protections will help low-income Californians maintain essential communications services during qualifying emergencies

SAN FRANCISCO, Sept. 17, 2026 – The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) today approved permanent, automatic disaster relief protections for customers enrolled in the California LifeLine program, helping ensure that low-income Californians can maintain access to essential communications services when disasters cause a disruption.

California LifeLine helps qualified households save money on phone and internet services. Today's decision establishes clear protections that will automatically apply in designated areas following a qualifying state of emergency declared by the Governor or the President of the U.S, when the disaster causes a disruption or degradation of utility service lasting more than 24 hours.

"Access to reliable communications is essential during an emergency," said CPUC President John Reynolds, who is assigned to the proceeding. "These permanent protections will give California LifeLine customers greater certainty and time to recover without having to worry that a missed renewal or period of non-use will cause them to lose their discounted service."

Under the decision, affected California LifeLine customers will receive:

- Temporary relief from non-usage requirements during qualifying disasters, helping prevent customers from losing California LifeLine service because they are unable to use their service during an emergency.
- Temporary relief from annual renewal requirements, giving customers additional time to recover from a disaster and replace lost documents, devices, or other essential items.

- At least 30 days of disaster protections, with an automatic extension when communications service remains disrupted or evacuation or shelter-in-place restrictions remain in effect.
- Waived activation, connection, and conversion fees for affected California LifeLine customers while the emergency protections are active.
- Improved emergency outreach, including coordination with 2-1-1 service providers so customers can more easily find information about California LifeLine and available disaster protections.

The geographic scope of the protections will correspond to the area identified in the emergency declaration. In California's 10 most populous counties, protections will apply to customers in ZIP codes directly affected by and bordering the disaster area.

"I am pleased that today's decision creates a streamlined process to ensure California LifeLine customers affected by natural disasters keep their service if they can't access the documents they need to renew," said Commissioner Darcie L. Houck. "We have done this in the past on an ad-hoc basis, but this decision enables us to act faster and more consistently, helping us keep communications reliable as natural disasters affect more Californians."

"The principle is simple; a disaster should not be the reason someone loses access to essential communications. But just because it's simple doesn't mean it's easy. It takes clear rules, coordination across institutions, and systems designed around what customers actually experience. These protections put that framework in place before the next emergency arrives," said Commissioner Christine Harada.

Helping Customers Navigate Changes to Federal Lifeline

The CPUC today also adopted changes to California LifeLine rules in response to changes to the federal Lifeline program implemented by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) effective Feb. 1, 2026.

California LifeLine and federal Lifeline now use separate enrollment and renewal processes. The California LifeLine program will continue to determine eligibility for the California program, while the federal government determines eligibility for federal Lifeline through its own process.

The CPUC's decision today requires California LifeLine providers to update their websites, application materials, annual notices, consumer education materials, and customer-service scripts to clearly explain these changes and help customers understand the relationship between the two programs.

"Customers should not have to navigate a complicated system without clear information," said President Reynolds. "The CPUC is requiring providers to give customers clearer guidance about the separate California and federal programs, including when customers may need to complete separate processes."

Today's decision also allows providers to develop dual-enrollment applications that could make it easier for customers to apply for both programs at the same time. Providers choosing to do so must clearly disclose that the programs are separately administered and explain applicable privacy and data-sharing implications. Customers must provide affirmative consent to participate in a dual-enrollment process. The CPUC will monitor enrollment trends through 2027 to better understand the impact of the federal program changes and identify opportunities to further streamline enrollment.

The CPUC's decision also establishes procedures for temporarily suspending or waiving certain California LifeLine requirements when circumstances warrant additional relief.

More Information

- Proposal Approved
- Docket Card
- California LifeLine Website

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