



**HEARTLAND
FORWARD**

AN INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMIC RENEWAL



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity

JB Pritzker, Governor

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HEARTLAND FORWARD LAUNCHES STATEWIDE CAMPAIGN TO HELP ILLINOIS FAMILIES ACCESS FEDERAL BROADBAND ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

New campaign kicks off to connect Illinois families and college students who are lacking access to internet with recently authorized FCC Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB); Provides \$50 monthly discount on internet service and other benefits

CHICAGO – Heartland Forward today joined federal, state and local collaborators in unveiling a public awareness campaign to help connect Illinoisans to affordable internet through the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program. The program utilizes federal COVID-19 relief funding to provide eligible households discounts of up to \$50 a month on home internet service, making the service more affordable and accessible for qualifying low-income families. The program also offers a \$100 discount towards the purchase of a laptop, computer or tablet from a participating provider.

For [over 650,000 Illinois families](#), affordability is a key deterrent to accessing sufficient internet service, and more than [1.1 million Illinoisans](#) lack at-home computing devices -- including [just over 20 percent](#) of households with children under the age of 18.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed how widespread and detrimental inequities in internet access are, as those without reliable internet service struggled to participate in school, gain access to health care and do their jobs remotely. The EBB program’s aim is to reduce these disparities by ensuring all households can afford to get online.

To make sure qualifying Illinoisans know about the program, Heartland Forward is launching a public awareness campaign including paid media and coordinated community outreach.

“While the federal government is making a major investment to close the internet affordability gap in the wake of the pandemic, it will take a robust and coordinated effort to reach eligible families, so they know about this opportunity to get connected,” **said Angie Cooper, chief program officer for Heartland Forward.** “The State of Illinois has made closing the digital divide a priority, and we are eager to contribute to those efforts to bring equitable access to internet service in the state. We’re hopeful for the success of the Emergency Broadband Benefit here in the near-term and help make the case for a long-term affordability solution in our country.”

The availability of new federal subsidy programming builds on efforts underway in Illinois to expand access to infrastructure, equipment and education programs for households lacking access and to bridge the digital divide throughout Illinois. Under Governor Pritzker's leadership, the State of Illinois had laid out a comprehensive plan to deliver high speed internet access throughout Illinois by 2024.

"The ability to plug in to the digital revolution was essential to the lives and livelihoods of so many Illinoisans before COVID-19, which is why my administration launched the Connect Illinois program to deliver high-speed broadband access to every Illinoisan, no matter where they live," **said Governor JB Pritzker**. "Heartland Forward's support for ensuring eligible Illinoisans know they can get access to telehealth, education, and economic opportunity is a welcome initiative as we continue to recover from the impact of COVID-19. This work has never been more urgent, and I'll leave no stone unturned as we seek to make our whole state prosper."

"I'm proud that the FCC is partnering with over 13,000 individuals and organizations to raise awareness about the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program. Efforts like this awareness campaign from the State of Illinois and Heartland Forward are critical to the success of this program and ensuring eligible residents know about this opportunity to get connected," **said FCC Acting Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel**. "Too many families in Illinois and around the country have struggled to keep up without an internet connection. Now help is available through the Emergency Broadband Benefit."

A household is eligible for the program if one member of the household meets at least one of the following criteria:

- has an income that is at or below 135 percent of the [Federal Poverty Guidelines](#) or participates in certain assistance programs, such as SNAP, Medicaid or the FCC's [Lifeline](#) program;
- approved to receive benefits under the free and reduced-price school lunch or breakfast program;
- received a Federal Pell Grant during the current award year;
- experienced a substantial loss of income through job loss or furlough since Feb. 29, 2020; or
- meets the eligibility criteria for a participating provider's existing low-income or COVID-19 program.

Those eligible can enroll in the program in several different ways. If they do not have access to the internet, they can sign up through a [participating broadband provider](#) or by calling (833) 511-0311 between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. any day of the week to request a mail-in application and more information about the program. If they do have access to the internet, they can apply online at getemergencybroadband.org. Additional information about the EBB is also available at www.fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit, and at schools, libraries, healthcare facilities and employment service centers throughout the state. Awareness materials will be shared with community organizations that serve individuals and families who qualify for the program.

The \$3.2 billion federal program is temporary and will conclude when funds run out or six months after the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declares an end to the pandemic. To get the word out to those in need, Heartland Forward is coordinating with a number of organizations that reach communities and individuals who qualify for the program, including AARP Illinois, LULAC Illinois, the Reaching Across Illinois Library System (RAILS), the Illinois Library Association, YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago, Greater Chicago Food Depository, PC's for People, Family Focus and Metropolitan Family Services.

"The pandemic has shown our reliance on high-speed internet, but too many Illinoisans are left behind," **said Bob Gallo, AARP Illinois State Director**. "Patients navigating telehealth, students learning remotely, and loved ones staying connected with family members by video chat are only a few of the many critical tasks that

require a high-speed connection. Helping older adults – and especially those in the African American/Black, Asian American/Pacific Islander and Hispanic/Latino communities – gain access and stay connected to high-speed internet is a key area of focus for AARP. That is why AARP fought hard for the EBB Program at the federal level and here in Illinois.”

Additionally, the Illinois Office of Broadband is coordinating across state agencies to help eligible families enroll in the EBB program, including the Department of Human Services, Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Illinois Board of Higher Education, Illinois Community College Board, the Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Student Assistance Commission and the Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development. For additional information on services provided by the Illinois Office of Broadband or to get in touch, please visit [DCEO’s website](#).

“The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of high speed and reliable internet access, and fortunately Governor Pritzker is making investments today to boost connectivity and to put more residents, businesses, and communities within reach of affordable service,” **said DCEO Acting Director Sylvia Garcia.** “New investments by the federal government to boost broadband access – including the Emergency Broadband Benefit – are an important measure as we work to get more residents connected. We are proud to see Heartland Forward as well as several state and local partners bring attention to critical programs like the EBB that will not only reduce costs on internet service, but that will equip our Illinois communities to be more competitive in the 21st century economy.”

“Families across the state of Illinois have struggled to get online throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. For those families, help is here. At IDHS, we are committed to helping families get the human services they need including food, healthcare, and now affordable access to the internet,” **said IDHS Secretary Grace B. Hou.** “Broadband services are a critical function for every family and we are pleased to see the efforts of Heartland Forward to get eligible residents these services.”

“From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, closing the digital divide has been a priority for the State Board of Education,” **said State Superintendent of Education Dr. Carmen I. Ayala.** “We’ve already invested \$80 million to expand access through our Digital Equity Formula Grants, and we plan to further invest \$100 million to support our efforts. We are glad to support the FCC’s Emergency Broadband Benefit program to continue this vital work. ISBE encourages every eligible family to take part in this program.”

Ginger Ostro, executive director, Illinois Board of Higher Education, said, “IBHE applauds the ongoing effort to make internet access more affordable. We learned during the pandemic that internet access can make or break a student’s ability to study and fully access higher education. Under Gov. Pritzker’s Rebuild Illinois capital plan, barriers to broadband access are being removed for communities at risk of being left out of the digital revolution, specifically communities of color and low-income students. The board welcomes these additional cost saving measures.”

“Increasing access to educational resources starts with reliable internet and these funds will help do that. The Illinois Community College Board is proud to be part of this effort to ensure eligible Illinoisans know about the Emergency Broadband Benefit, to help them get the education they want and deserve,” **said Illinois Community College Board Executive Director, Brian Durham.**

“Staying connected and having a strong network is imperative, especially with the communication challenges experienced by so many Illinois families that have been elevated by the COVID-19 pandemic,” **said**

Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD) Executive Director Jamilah R. Jor’dan.

“The Emergency Broadband Benefit Program is an essential effort to bridge gaps in internet affordability and equity to close the digital divide in Illinois. GOECD is committed to supporting Illinois children on the path of learning recovery as the State heals from the pandemic, and we encourage families facing difficulties with their internet to utilize this opportunity.”

“Providing equitable access to the Internet is critical to help ensure that all Illinoisans have the educational opportunities they need to meet their education and career goals,” **said Eric Zarnikow, Executive Director of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC)**. “Digital access also makes it infinitely easier for students to find and apply for the financial aid that can make postsecondary education more affordable. We are pleased to work alongside Heartland Forward and other partners to get the word out to students and families about this important broadband benefit.”

Heartland Forward is promoting EBB program awareness as part of its three-year Connecting the Heartland initiative focused on ensuring families and businesses across America’s heartland have access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet service, with initial efforts in Illinois, Arkansas, Ohio and Tennessee.

About Heartland Forward:

Heartland Forward is a nonpartisan, 501c3 organization whose mission is to improve economic performance in the center of the United States by advocating for fact-based solutions to foster job creation, knowledge-based and inclusive growth and improved health outcomes. Heartland Forward conducts independent, data-driven research and programs to facilitate action-oriented discussion and impactful policy recommendations. To learn more, visit <https://heartlandforward.org/>.

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