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BCAP offices will be closed Wednesday, July 4

AT&T Ohio is asking for permission to drop out of a program that helps poor consumers living in most of its service territory afford telephone service.

The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio is taking public comments until Aug. 31 on AT&T's request to end its involvement in Lifeline, a federally funded program that provides discounts to eligible consumers for landline, wireless and broadband services. Customers enrolled in the program receive a monthly credit of \$9.25, which is applied toward their monthly landline bill. The average landline cost is \$35.72 a month for flat-rate telephone service.

AT&T has wanted to drop the service for some time. Last September, it asked the PUCO to remove its designation as an eligible telecommunications carrier, which is required to be eligible for the Lifeline program. If PUCO approves AT&T's request, its Lifeline customers in the affected areas would have to sign up with another company that offers the service where they live to remain covered by Lifeline.

AT&T's proposal would affect fewer than 10,000 customers throughout its Ohio service territory, including those in central Ohio, the company said. Its Lifeline customers in more rural parts of the state, mostly in eastern and southern Ohio, would continue to be covered by AT&T. More than 30 companies currently provide Lifeline service in Ohio, but the Federal Communications Commission is considering a proposal to end Lifeline support for phone companies that don't own their own infrastructure, PUCO says. If that happens, that could reduce the number of companies that offer Lifeline.

PUCO is concerned about the AT&T proposal and the effect it could have on low-income consumers and accessibility to Lifeline, spokesman Matt Schilling said. "Access to a dial tone in some form is imperative," he said, whether it is to call for help, stay in contact with family and friends, or search for a job. AT&T said in a regulatory filing that there have been significant changes in the telecommunications marketplace in Ohio since it began offering Lifeline as more consumers drop landlines. AT&T said it has received permission to drop out in 10 other states and has requests pending in two other states.

AT&T's effort comes at a time when the Lifeline discount for landline service is being reduced in advance of its elimination on Dec. 1, 2021. It will be reduced to \$7.25 per month on Dec. 1, 2019 and to \$5.25 on Dec. 1, 2020. The discount will remain for broadband, which also can be used for phone calls, and cellphones. AT&T said in a regulatory filing that the number of its traditional residential landlines

dropped 81 percent between 2005 and 2015 as customers turn to other options, such as cellphones, and that the number of AT&T Lifeline customers also has plummeted even as the total number has grown in the state.

AT&T said it has lost 94 percent of the Lifeline customers over the past eight years and that it has just 2.1 percent of Ohio's 511,666 Lifeline customers. "Since 2008, increased competition and a growing number of other service providers offering Lifeline discounts to eligible consumers, has led to a dramatic reduction in AT&T Ohio's Lifeline subscribers," AT&T said Monday in a statement. "Since then, the number of Lifeline subscribers we serve through our traditional voice network has dropped significantly to fewer than 10,000, with 95 percent of AT&T Ohio's Lifeline subscribers leaving AT&T. ... None of this impacts the voice services we provide to our customers."

Still, groups that represent lower-income consumers expressed concern about the proposal. "The older, more vulnerable population who can't readily leave their home rely on the telephone to communicate with family members or caregivers," said Jason Smith, associate state director for advocacy for Ohio AARP. "Lifeline allows eligible people to sort of keep pace and afford these services."

Many Lifeline consumers live in rural areas where cellphone coverage is spotty so they need landlines, he said. "We all depend on telephone services for our daily life, and poor people are no different," said Susan Jagers, director of the Ohio Poverty Law Center. The proposal comes as the General Assembly debates a bill that would allow phone companies to raise the cost of basic phone service, a proposal that could raise prices to the point where people can't afford the service, Smith said. "It's not the intent, but the concern is that would be the practical effect," he said. – *Columbus (OH) Dispatch*

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy (D) is approving a bill that dedicates \$5 million to strengthen local media outlets in the state. The state legislature passed the "Civic Info Bill" late last month, according to [news website NJ.com](#). The bill created the Civic Information Consortium — a unique nonprofit developed with five universities — to promote the spread of news and information throughout the state. The bill was conceived by the [Free Press Action Fund](#), an advocacy group on media issues.

The effort is led by The College of New Jersey, Montclair State University, the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rowan University and Rutgers University. The consortium will share the \$5 million with local news organizations, emphasizing "underserved communities, low-income communities and communities of color," the Free Press Action Fund said. The money was included in the fiscal 2019 budget, which Murphy signed [into law on Sunday](#). He is expected to formally sign the legislation creating the consortium soon.

State Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg (D) and State Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald (D) sponsored the bill, NJ.com reported. "Local news is the lifeblood of a community. It adds local context to stories and keeps those in power accountable. Supporting it is undoubtedly in the public's best interest," Greenwald said last week. – *The Hill*



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