Universal Service: Connecting Millions to Broadband

April 8, 2025

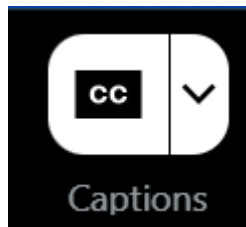**Universal Service**
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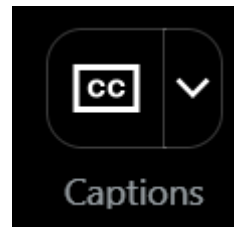# Housekeeping – Closed Captioning (CC)
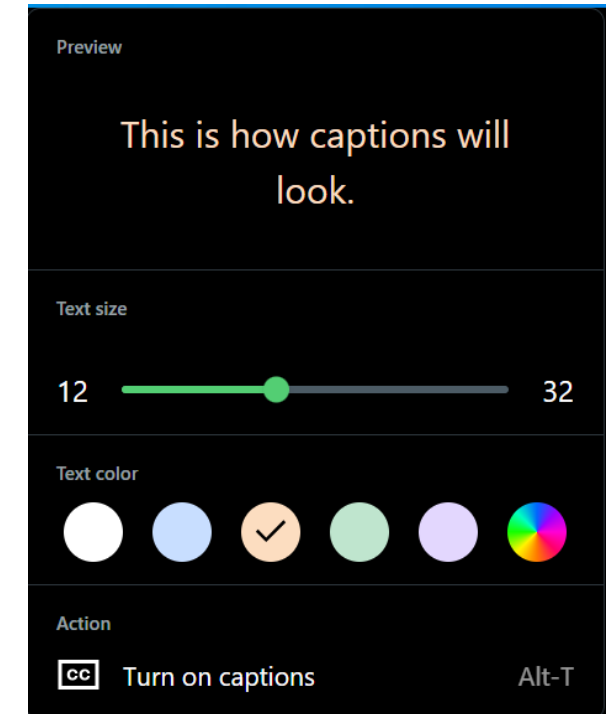
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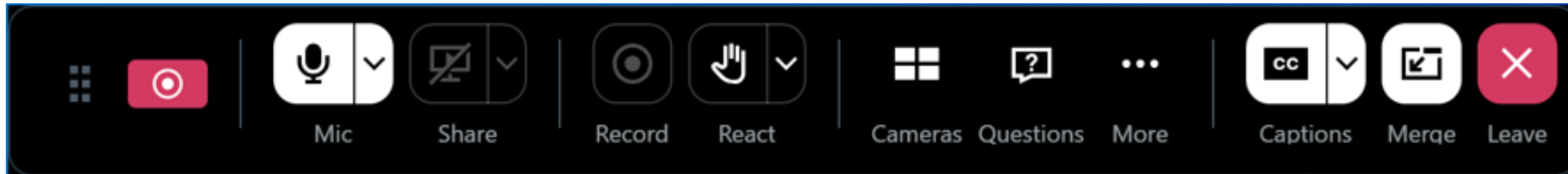
- You can change the caption font size and color.

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Captions ON

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Housekeeping – Audio

- **Audio is available through your computer's speakers.**

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- Make sure you are connected to an audio source that works.

- The audience will remain muted.

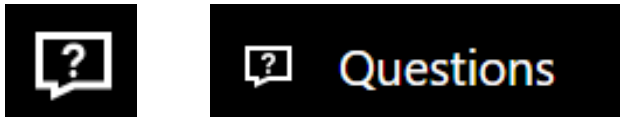- If your audio freezes, restart the webinar.

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Housekeeping – Materials & Questions

- A copy of the slide deck is in the **Materials** section of the webinar panel.

- Enter questions at any time using the **Questions** box.

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Housekeeping – Raise Your Hand

- Raise your hand at any time using the **React** box.
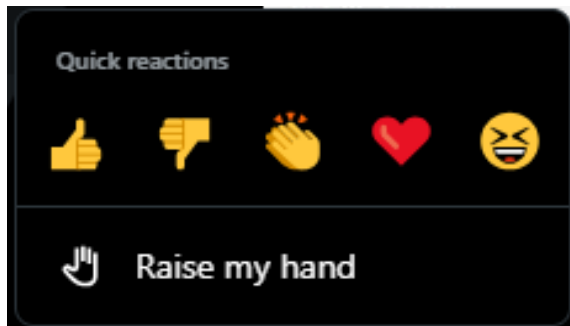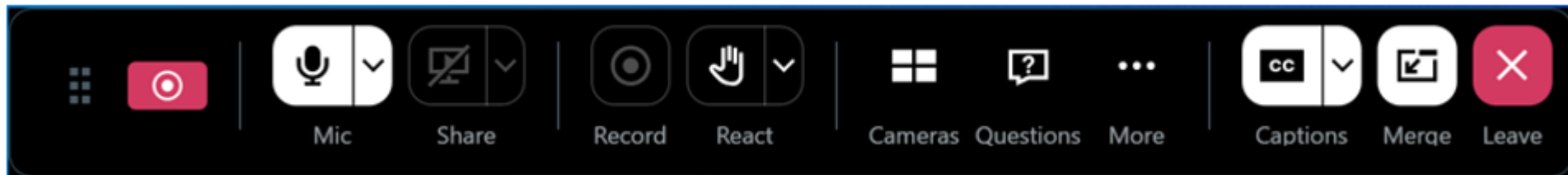
Disclaimer

To accommodate all attendees, real-time closed captions will be present during this presentation. We apologize in advance for any transcription errors or distractions and appreciate your understanding.

Please be aware that this webinar is being recorded.

Meet Our Team – Tribal Liaison

Gem Labarta

Tribal Liaison | Shared Services

Provide clear, accurate, real-time support to Tribal stakeholders.

TribalLiaison@usac.org

Upcoming Dates

- Lifeline
  - How to Apply for Lifeline – April 9, 2025, at 3 p.m. ET – <u>Register</u>

- E-Rate
  - No upcoming webinars at this time. To view prior webinars, please visit the <u>E-Rate Webinars</u> page.

- Rural Health Care
  - FY2025 Healthcare Connect Fund Program Office Hours #4 – April 16, 2025, at 2 p.m. ET – <u>Register</u>
  - FY2025 Telecom Program Office Hours #4 – April 23, 2025, at 2 p.m. ET – <u>Register</u>

- Service Providers
  - Office Hours: How to Fill Out an FCC Form 499-Q – April 16, 2025, at 2 p.m. ET – <u>Register</u>

Agenda

- Introduction to USAC

- One USAC: Four Programs

  - Lifeline Program

  - E-Rate Program

    - Tribal Library E-Rate Advocacy Program (T-LEAP)

  - Rural Health Care Program

  - High Cost Program

- Questions

- Service Provider Information

![Everyone. Connected.]

Everyone. Connected.

Who We Are: The Universal Service Administrative Company

- The **Universal Service Administrative Company** (USAC) is an independent, not-for-profit organization designated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

- USAC is responsible for administering the **USF** and its four programs.

- The USF exists to ensure that all people in the United States have access to quality and affordable connectivity services.

Lifeline Program
Discounted phone and internet service to eligible low-income consumers.

E-Rate Program
Funding for broadband services to eligible schools and libraries.

Rural Health Care Program
Funding for telecom and broadband services for eligible rural health care providers.

High Cost Program
Reduced rates for telecom and broadband services in eligible high-cost areas.

Overview: Who Makes the Rules?

- In the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Congress directed the FCC to establish the universal service programs.

- The FCC sets rules and policies for the USF programs and gives direction to USAC.

- USAC is responsible for the day-to-day administration of the USF in accordance with FCC requirements.

CONGRESS   FCC   USAC
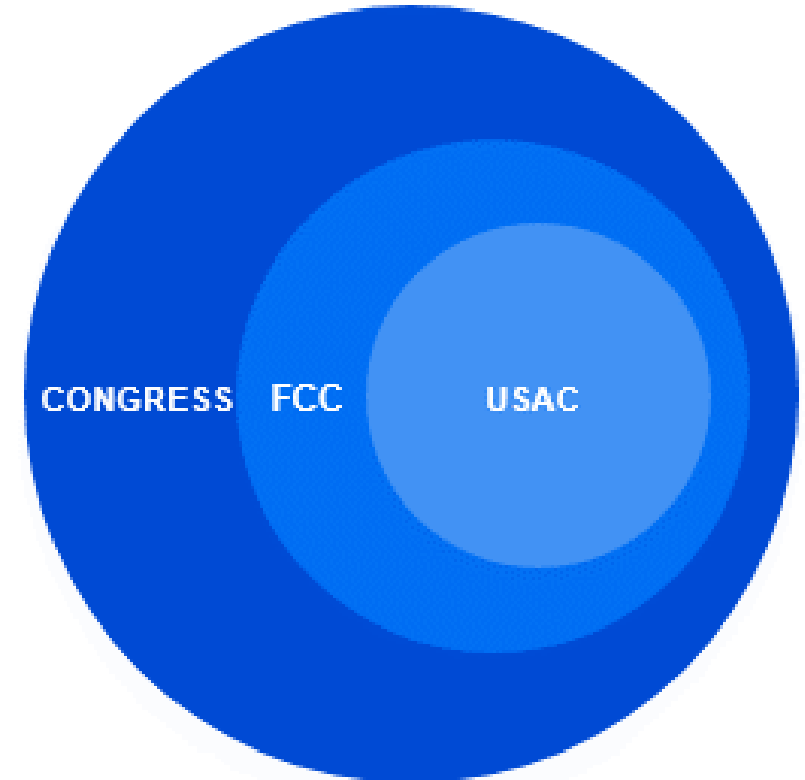
Universal Service Fund Programs

Lifeline Program

Lifeline Program

- Eligible low-income households receive a discount off their monthly broadband or telephone bill of up to $5.25 or $9.25 (depending on service type), with an enhanced support amount of up to $25 available for services to residents of Tribal lands.

- Each eligible household can receive one Lifeline benefit.

- Consumers must meet one eligibility criterion described below and apply through the Lifeline National Verifier:
  - Income at or below 135 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines
  - Participate in Medicaid
  - Participate in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
  - Participate in Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
  - Participate in Federal Public Housing Assistance (FPHA)
  - Participate in Veterans and Survivors Pension Benefit

Lifeline Enhanced Tribal Benefit

- Lifeline offers enhanced benefits to consumers who live on qualifying Tribal lands:
  - Up to $25/month extra for subscribers on qualifying Tribal lands (up to $34.25 total)
  - A one-time "Link Up" benefit of up to $100 to connect telecommunications services from carriers receiving High Cost support on qualifying Tribal lands

- Additional eligibility options for consumers living on Tribal lands:
  - Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance (BIA-GA)
  - Tribally Administered Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
  - Tribal Head Start (must meet qualifying income standard)
  - Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)

Lifeline Survivor Benefit
Overview

- Under the [Safe Connections Act](#) (SCA), survivors of domestic violence, human trafficking, and related crimes, as well as individuals caring for those against whom such acts were committed, can receive discounted phone, internet, or bundled services through the Lifeline program.

- On August 29, 2024, the FCC issued a [Public Notice](#) announcing that service providers must comply with the rules allowing survivors to receive emergency Lifeline support.

Lifeline Survivor Benefit
Emergency Lifeline Support for Survivors

- As of September 4, 2024, survivors who attempt a line separation request and are experiencing financial hardship may qualify for and receive emergency Lifeline support for up to six months.

  - Qualifying survivors can receive a discount of up to $9.25 on phone, internet, or bundled services.

  - Qualifying survivors residing on qualifying Tribal lands can receive a discount of up to $34.25 on phone, internet, or bundled services.

  - After six months, qualifying survivors may apply for the standard Lifeline benefit, or Tribal enhancement, if applicable.

E-Rate Program

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E-Rate Program

- Provides support to schools and libraries across the nation to obtain affordable, high-speed broadband services and internal connections to connect students and library patrons with learning opportunities and services

- Eligible applicants: Public or private schools (K-12), libraries, and groups of schools and libraries (e.g., consortia, districts, systems)

- Eligible services: internet access, telecommunications services, and related equipment (see the full eligible service list)

E-Rate Program: Tribal Libraries

- In 2022, the FCC clarified E-Rate rules to confirm that Tribal libraries are eligible for E-Rate funding.

- A library may be designated as a Tribal library by a Tribal Council (e.g., pursuant to a Tribal Resolution).

- Tribal libraries designated by a Tribal Council must have three characteristics commonly associated with Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grants to Native American libraries:

    - Regularly scheduled hours,

    - Staff, and

    - Materials available for library users.

New! Tribal Library E-Rate Advocacy Program (T-LEAP)

Tribal Library E-Rate Advocacy Program (T-LEAP) Overview

- One-on-one assistance in all aspects of preparing, applying, and receiving E-Rate support during the upcoming funding year.

- Trainings designed to help you apply for funding, including:

    - How to use the E-Rate Productivity Center (EPC).

    - Walkthroughs of the competitive bidding and application processes, including timelines and information needed to complete competitive bidding and the application.

- Hands-on support while completing the different E-Rate forms and processes needed to apply for and receive E-Rate funding.

- [Applications](#) accepted year-round with three focused trainings yearly.

Rural Health Care Program

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Rural Health Care Program

- The Rural Health Care (RHC) program provides funding to eligible health care providers (HCPs) for telecommunications and broadband services needed to deliver health care.
  - The Telecommunications (Telecom) Program funds voice and other telecommunications services.
  - The Healthcare Connect Fund (HCF) Program funds broadband services, network equipment, and related costs.

- Eligible applicants: Must be a non-profit or public HCP located in a rural area. HCF also allows eligibility through a consortium that is majority rural.

- Eligible HCPs must meet program requirements.

High Cost Program

High Cost Program

- The High Cost program, including the Connect America Fund, is designed to ensure that consumers in rural, insular, and high-cost areas have access to modern communications networks capable of providing voice and broadband service, both fixed and mobile, at rates that are reasonably comparable to those in urban areas.

- The program fulfills this universal service goal by allowing eligible carriers who serve these areas to recover some of their costs from the USF.

High Cost Program: How It Works

- The FCC determines which areas of the country are eligible for High Cost funding.

- Through different support processes, eligible service providers are authorized for support in deploying network infrastructure in those areas and providing service.

- Service providers regularly report their deployment progress.

- USAC monitors provider compliance with build-out obligations.

Questions?

Service Providers

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Lifeline Program Service Provider Process

- Must be an eligible telecommunications carrier (ETC).

- Non-facilities-based providers must have an FCC-approved compliance plan before they can become an ETC.

- Obtain Study Area Code (SAC) and a Service Provider Identification Number (498 ID/SPIN).

- Set up Lifeline system access with USAC.

- Begin enrolling consumers and provide Lifeline-discounted service.

- Claim reimbursement for discounts passed on to qualifying Lifeline consumers.

E-Rate Program Service Provider Process

- Obtain a Service Provider Identification Number (SPIN/498 ID).

- Submit bids in response to applicants' requests for service.

- If selected by an applicant (school or library), sign a contract with them.

- Provide agreed-upon services.

- Invoice USAC for the amount discounted from the applicant's bill OR invoice the applicant so they can invoice USAC for the discounted amount.

Rural Health Care Program Service Provider Process

- Obtain a Service Provider Identification Number (SPIN/498 ID).

- Submit bids in response to applicants' requests for service.

- If selected by an applicant (HCP), sign a service agreement with them.

- Credit the HCP for costs covered by the RHC program funding request.

- Invoice USAC for the approved funding amount.

High Cost Program Service Provider Process

- Eligibility criteria and fund processes vary from fund to fund.

- To participate, service providers must be a registered eligible telecommunications carrier (ETC).

- Participating ETCs must file an FCC Form 481 annually, detailing their financial and operational information and engagement with Tribal governments.

- Providers file build-out data in the High Cost Universal Broadband (HUBB) portal each year.

- Participating providers must submit to performance testing and verification reviews.

Questions?

USAC Contact Information

- For program information, visit www.USAC.org.

- Consumers interested in Lifeline should visit www.LifelineSupport.org.

- For general USAC Tribal information, visit www.usac.org/about/tribal-nations/.

- USAC's Tribal Liaison can answer questions and connect you to resources. Contact Gem Shandiin Labarta at TribalLiaison@USAC.org.

Thank You!

Universal Service Administrative Co.