

Helping Patients Access Free Mobile Phones and Cell Service

BY AMY ELGIN



AnMed Health is a smaller-sized rural hospital located in Anderson, S.C. Currently, AnMed Health Cancer Center is staffed by four medical oncologists, one gynecological oncologist, two radiation oncologists, four nurse practitioners, and one physician assistant. Our cancer center support services department consists of four oncology nurse navigators, a counselor, a dietitian, and a patient resource coordinator (me!) who all help our patients in a myriad of ways—from diagnosis to survivorship care. Our patient population is diverse, including those with little formal education, those with doctorate degrees, and everyone in between.

I have been the patient resource coordinator at AnMed Health Cancer Center for almost five years now, and the best part of my job is being able to help patients and obtaining financial and other resource assistance that so many don't even know is available. I am able to be a part of the patient's journey from start to finish and feel like I have helped to ease some of the burdens they faced in the beginning; that feeling is just amazing!

In the Beginning

In 2015, when I was still very new to my position, we began treating a newly diagnosed patient with cancer who required an "all hands on deck" approach. The patient was homeless, unemployed, and uninsured, and we had no way of directly contacting him. Our only means of contact was through his friend who lived near the abandoned house the patient stayed in and

who could take his phone to the patient if needed. After a quick search online, I found two websites that offered cell phones to low-income patients at little to no cost to them, including the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Lifeline program (lifelinesupport.org).

When I was asked to write this article, I did some research on this federal program. It was an eye-opener for me because I had no idea that the Lifeline program has been around for as long as it has. With the increasing number of patents struggling to afford their cancer treatment and the current economic downturn due to COVID-19, the resources below may help.

Technology Creates Need for Universal Access

The FCC established the Lifeline program in 1985 to make communications easier and more affordable for low-income individuals.¹ At that time, the Lifeline program provided landline phone service at a discount. It is now part of the Universal Service Fund, which was created by the FCC in 1997 to promote universal access of all telecommunication services.² In 1997 the FCC also made changes to the program under its Universal Service Order that included the following updates:

- Lifeline was now available to eligible households in all states, commonwealths, and territories of the United States.
- It became more affordable for low-income households.
- The order increased the federal support amount to Lifeline.

- The order also included operator services, directory assistance, and emergency services at no extra charge.

Later, in 2005 the FCC made Lifeline benefits available for pre-paid wireless service plans. This allowed wireless phone service providers to offer free mobile phone services to low-income households. Some wireless service providers would also include a free cell phone for users. To reduce waste, modernize Lifeline, and fight fraud, such as not being able to confirm that enrolled customers were eligible for the program to begin with, the FCC overhauled the program in 2012 and enacted the following reforms:

- The National Lifeline Accountability Database was created to reduce duplicate enrollments to the program by the same customer.
- Fully automated eligibility databases were used to ensure that only applications from qualified customers were processed, and the verification process was made easier for customers and providers.
- The program adopted the rule of one per household.
- Households were re-defined to be "economic units," which allowed low-income families who lived at the same address to sign up for the program.

To qualify for the Lifeline program, applicants' income must be at or below 135 percent of the federal poverty guidelines, or they (or someone in their household) must be a participant in one of the following programs:

- Medicaid
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Supplemental Security Income
- Federal Public Housing Assistance
- Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit
- Tribal Programs (and live on a federally recognized Tribal lands).

Applicants must show proof of participation via a card, letter, or official document when applying. Most service providers will use the same eligibility requirements, but some do vary by state. Be sure to check your local providers' guidelines when applying.

Since my first encounter five years ago with this homeless patient, my cancer center has treated other patients who needed access to a device to communicate easily with our care team. If you are facing the same situation, know that there are multiple service providers in the Lifeline program and three different ways to apply for Lifeline support:

- Print and submit a paper application via mail with proof of applicant's eligibility.
- Apply online at nationalverifier.servicenowservices.com/lifeline.
- Use the Lifeline National Verifier online tool to identify a participating phone and/or Internet provider in your area.

Lifeline also has its own rules and rights to ensure that the program is providing fair, high-quality service to its customers, including:

- Proof of eligibility.
- Only one discount per household.
- One must recertify/renew every year. This must be done within 60 days of the provider requesting a recertification, or Lifeline eligibility will be lost.
- Use it or lose it. If receiving free service from Lifeline, patients must use their benefits at least once every 30 days or service may be turned off.
- Keep your service provider up to date. If the patient's address changes, he or she no longer meets eligibility requirements, or another member of the household gets Lifeline, the providing company must be notified within 30 days.

- Be honest if applying for Lifeline. It is against the law to be fraudulent on any forms or questionnaires when applying to the program.

If applicants meet program eligibility, Lifeline guarantees the following rights:

- Minimum service standards. Currently patients who are eligible for cell phone service receive at least 1000 minutes.
- Choice of a hotspot-enabled device.
- Choice of which service (e.g., voice or Internet) is a Lifeline benefit. (Lifeline cannot provide both Internet and voice services at no cost, so applicants can have their benefit applied to one and pay for the other.)
- Opportunity to change service provider at any time.
- Answers and help. If a service provider is unresponsive or refuses to help, customers can contact their state's public utility regulator, Universal Service Administrative Company, or the FCC to submit a complaint.

Other Companies That Can Help

In addition to Lifeline, other companies provide similar services to eligible cancer patients.

The first free cell phone I obtained for our homeless patient was through SafeLink Wireless (safelinkwireless.com), which offers an easy online application process. The patient was a SNAP recipient, so I completed the online application and scanned a copy of his SNAP card to upload with the application as proof of participation. Within 10 to 14 business days, the patient had received his mobile phone in the mail. Because the patient was homeless, we mailed it to a close friend of his and he ensured that the patient received it.

Once patients receive their SafeLink wireless phone, it must be activated online, which is also very easy to do. Qualified recipients receive a SIM card, about 350 voice minutes, and three gigabits of data every month for free, along with features like unlimited texting, voicemail, caller

identification, 911 access, 411 directory assistance, and 4G LTE capable coverage. With this program, patients can also use their own smartphone if it is compatible with the program or unlocked.

The simple act of finding and applying to SafeLink for this patient helped our entire cancer center because we could now reach the patient at any time. The patient's quality of life drastically improved, too, because the cell phone gave him a sense of freedom he did not previously have. No longer did our patient have to rely on his friend to come and get him when his doctor or navigator needed to speak with him. Most important, if our patient had an emergency, he could get in contact with 911.

Since that first patient, I have also used Lifeline Wireless and Access Wireless (accesswireless.com). With Access Wireless, applicants receive about 250 voice minutes, unlimited texting, and three gigabits of data for free each month.

Putting Patients' Needs First

Connecting qualifying patients with these services has made them feel more independent and improved their access to care. In turn this has also improved patient compliance. I have been able to help several patients from this one Internet search, and I am sharing this knowledge with others who may be able to help their eligible cancer patients in this time of great need.

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References

1. CBS Miami. The Lifeline Program through the years: from origins to the present. Available online at: miami.cbslocal.com/2015/01/19/the-lifeline-program-through-the-years-from-origins-to-the-present/#:~:text=The%20Origins%20of%20the%20Lifeline,come%20up%20with%20this%20plan. Last accessed October 6, 2020.
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