



From the desk of Attorney General Bob Cooper



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Attorney General Joins TRA in Promoting Telephone Connections for Low Income Tennesseans

In an emergency, we all like to think help is just a phone call away, but many low income Tennesseans may not be able to afford a telephone. That is why my office is partnering with state agencies and the private sector under the leadership of the Tennessee Regulatory Authority (TRA) to promote the Lifeline and Link-Up programs. These programs enable low income households to obtain basic land line service, crucial for Tennesseans who need to stay connected to police, community assistance, and family.

Lifeline provides a discount of up to \$13.50 per month on the local wire line portion of the phone bill. There are no discounts on long distance, caller ID, or other features. Link-Up pays for one-half of the installation charges for new or transferred land line service up to a maximum of \$30. Deposits are always an obstacle for needy families, but customers who request "local service only" and "long distance block" don't have to pay a deposit when qualified for Link-Up. You can still make long distance calls by using a prepaid calling card.

Unfortunately, too few people know they are eligible for these programs. Only about 20 percent of eligible Tennessee households are enrolled (an estimated 177,000 of over 880,000 possible participants), according to the TRA.

The Consumer Advocate Division of my office and the TRA are trying to make sure all Tennesseans have access to vital communication services. Many people may not realize how important a basic land line telephone is in an emergency. Others may believe that a household telephone is a luxury, especially when trying to decide where to cut household expenses. Many may depend only on a pre-paid cell phone.

The problem is that when emergency help is required or families need to check on an elderly relative, basic land line telephone service is important. For example, when calling 911 from a cell phone, the caller will lose valuable response time if he or she cannot provide the operator with a location or address. With a basic phone line, the 911 operator can quickly determine the caller's address even if the caller is a small child or a stroke victim who cannot respond.

We want to make sure eligible Tennesseans know it is easy to qualify for these programs. Families receiving food stamps, TennCare, Supplemental Security Income or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families automatically qualify. Families that receive help from the Low

Income Home & Energy Assistance Program or the National Free School Lunch Program or live in Section 8 housing may also be eligible. Households may also qualify if the gross monthly income is at or below 135 percent of the federal poverty level, which currently is \$1,217 for individuals and \$2,480 for a family of four. There are probably many Tennessee families who are now qualified for this service due to the economic downturn.

If you believe you or someone in your family needs basic land line telephone service but cannot afford it, look into Lifeline and Link-Up. Contact your local telephone provider or AT&T, which is working along with the TRA to promote these programs. The TRA can provide information on the program and explain how to apply at 1- 877-691-2969, or visit the TRA's website at <http://www.tn.gov/tra/consumerfiles/teleassist.html>. AT&T's toll free number is 1-888-757-6500.