

WASHINGTON TELEPHONE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (WTAP)

In 1987, the Washington State Legislature found that

- universal telephone service is an important policy goal of the state;
- recent changes in the telecommunications industry raise concerns about the ability of low-income persons to continue to afford telephone service;
- it is in the public interest to take steps to mitigate the effects of these changes on low income persons.

And as a result the Washington Telephone Assistance Program was authorized by the State Legislature in 1987. Initially it was authorized for five years only, and re-authorized several times. Finally it was authorized permanently in 2003.

WTAP benefits are governed by [RCW 80.36.410 - .470](#).

WTAP was established to subsidize wire line (landline) phone service **only** as the funding for program comes from the collection of the excise tax imposed on all land line phones.

DETERMINING ELIGIBILITY FOR WTAP

WTAP eligibility requirements are established in [WAC 388-273-0020 *Who may receive Washington Telephone Assistance Program \(WTAP\)?*](#)

When a person is approved for qualifying public assistance benefits, they are sent a letter regarding WTAP services. Clients are directed to contact their local telephone company to apply for WTAP.

Telephone company representatives call WTAP using a dedicated toll-free line to confirm client eligibility.

To be WTAP eligible an applicant must:

- Be an adult, or, if under 18, be the payee and head of household;
- Apply for the program through the telephone company;
- Have local telephone services billed in their name; and
- Subscribe to the lowest available flat rate service.

And an applicant must receive ongoing benefits from one of the following assistance programs:

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- State Family Assistance (SFA)
- Pregnant Women Assistance (PWA)
- Aged, Blind or Disable (ABD) cash assistance
- Refugee Assistance
- Food Assistance
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Medical Assistance, **including** Medicare cost sharing programs

- Community Options Program Entry System (COPES)
- DSHS Chore Services
- Have completed using community service voice mail, and been identified to the department as eligible for WTAP by the community agency that provided your community service voice mail program.

The WTAP subsidy begins on the date of application to the telephone company, provided that WTAP eligibility has been verified through the DSHS. WTAP benefits are not retroactive. Once approved for WTAP, a household remains eligible for the program through the end of the SFY in which they were approved.

DSHS has no statutory authority to terminate WTAP services to any clients. Clients become ineligible for WTAP services when they no longer receive qualifying programs benefits and do not meet the statutory eligibility criteria established under [RCW 80.36.470](#) and [WAC 388-273-0020](#).

At the end of the SFY (each June 30th), WTAP households who are still receiving benefits under a qualifying assistance program are automatically re-certified for another year of WTAP services.

BENEFITS

Per [WAC 388-273-0025 Benefits you receive as a WTAP participant](#), eligible WTAP households can receive:

- A reduced monthly rate for local telephone service,
- A 50% discount on connection fees (a maximum of \$22 and limited to one time per address).
- A waiver of deposit for local service (limited to once a year).

WTAP households pay the first \$8.00 of their monthly service bill. It is referred to as “the client threshold”. The federal Universal Service Administration Corporation (USAC) provides up to \$10.00 towards the monthly phone service bill. The remainder of the bill is subsidized by WTAP. Monthly reimbursement is restricted to \$19.00 per line per month.

Connection fees are covered by WTAP and the federal Link Up program. WTAP pays half (up to \$22), and Link Up pays the other half (up to \$30). This service is limited to once per service address for each line connection.

In 2003, the Legislature added **Community Service Voice Mail (CVM)** program to WTAP to help low-income persons who are unable to access WTAP benefits because of

- being homeless, or
- unable to get traditional (wire) phone service.

The CSVM program gives individuals a local phone number connected to a confidential voice mailbox. Anyone wanting to contact the CVM recipient can leave a message and the recipient can retrieve the message from any phone using their PIN number.

Participating Community Service Voice Mail (CSVM) households do not pay any monthly fees.

FUNDING AND ADMINISTRATION

The WTAP program is funded exclusively through the collection of the excise tax up to 14 cent per month imposed on all telephone land line.

The tax is NOT collected on wireless lines.

WTAP is jointly administered by

- Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS),
- Department of Revenue (DOR),
- Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (WUTC), and
- Department of Commerce.

DSHS provides

- overall program administration,
- outreach to potential eligible participants, and
- WTAP funds management.

The Department of Revenue (DOR)

- sets the excise tax (limited by RCW 80.36.430 to no more than 14 cents);
- collects the excise tax from telephone companies, and
- distributes the funds into a special trust established for WTAP program.

The WUTC is responsible for setting rate for “the client threshold” at the request of and as justified by DSHS.

The Department of Commerce

- establishes agreements with sub-contractors to provide CVM service in the 27 counties, and
- provides the contracts’ oversight.

INVOICES & BUSINESS PARTICIPATION

All wire line phone companies that are eligible telecommunications carriers (ETC) may be reimbursed for WTAP services.

Telephone companies invoice DSHS for payments for three categories of service:

- reduction of connection fee,
- reimbursement for waiver of deposit, and
- monthly rate discount

They may also invoice administrative costs attributable to the WTAP program.

Telephone companies are asked to invoice the WTAP on a monthly basis. Monthly accounting frequently requires readjustment due to late invoicing and account corrections by the industry.

The telephone companies directly bill the Universal Service Administration Company (USAC) for the matching amount.

VERIFICATION CALLS

Telephone companies must verify WTAP eligibility before providing a WTAP discount. DSHS provides a toll free hotline through which landline phone company representatives can verify the eligibility of any WTAP applicant, making the application process fast and easy for the client.

Calls require WTAP staff to work with phone companies' representatives and clients to resolve customer and accounting problems such as

- incorrect clients' DSHS identification numbers,
- mismatched Social Security numbers, or
- incorrect billing names.

WTAP and telephone companies continually collaborate on finding ways to streamline the verification process.

For the last two (2) years, the CVM sub-contractors also have an ability to call toll free to verify the applicants' eligibility for CVM services. This change was made at the request of CVM sub-contractors.

DSHS/WTAP staff also operates a toll free public information line. DSHS WTAP representatives handled an average of 4,227 calls per month, or over 50,000 calls per year.

WTAP FUND ACTIVITY

Overall program costs for WTAP in SFY 11 were \$7,772,574.

Total excise tax revenue for SFY 11 was \$4,651,626.

In State Fiscal Year 2011 WTAP served 121,295 clients.

During the last three years WTAP program was mandated by Legislature to contract with WIN 211 service for 1 million dollars for each 2009/2010 and 2011/2012 biennium.

PROGRAM CHALLENGES

The Washington Telephone Assistance Program continues to help state's most needy citizens to afford basic phone service or gain access to Community Voice Mail.

While funding and continued program operations appear secure, WTAP faces the long term challenges such as managing program costs in future years when there is an increase in cellular phone usage and a decrease in land line service, while the pool of eligible WTAP customers continues to increase.

The federal programs - Lifeline and Link Up, support wire line **and** wireless services. Currently WTAP supports wire line services only. Adding wireless service would:

- necessitate collection of excise tax from wireless service providers,
- cause an unknown increase to workload, and
- require additional WTAP eligibility staff.

NEXT STEPS

During almost 25 years of its existence WTAP helped to connect over 100,000 households yearly to family members, community resources, children's schools, medical providers, etc. Over 3,000 individuals or households who don't have a traditional phone, were able to have access to a community voice mailbox at no cost.

The Department continues to seek new ways to increase program efficiency through technology.