

Help in paying your utility bills

You may be able to get help in paying your utility bills and other costs of keeping warm (for example, warm clothing, space heaters, or house repairs needed to keep you warm) under the **Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)**. You may be eligible for the **Energy Assistance Cash Grant**, the **Crisis Grant** and the **Crisis Interface** run by the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services. To apply or for more information contact your local County Board of Assistance. You may also be able to get help paying for water/wastewater under the **Low Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP)**.

Hardship Funds

Each electric and gas company has a Hardship Fund to which low-income customers may apply in order to avoid shut-off or to have service reconnected. Although each company's Hardship Fund may be called by a different name such as 'Dollar Energy', 'UESF' or 'MEAF', they are all funded for assisting low-income customers pay keep utility service. Call your company to see if you are eligible.

Help in reducing your bills

The *Residential Low Income Usage Reduction Program* includes free services to eligible low income utility customers such as a home energy survey, weatherization services and usage reduction education. Contact your utility company in order to apply or to get more information.

CARES

The CARES program helps customers who are having trouble paying their bill because of short-term problems. It offers referrals to social service agencies, budget counseling, and special arrangements for bill payment.

Conclusion

If your case involves a threatened or actual shut off of utilities, you should contact the PUC at (800) 692 7380. If you have some other utility problem that you cannot work out with the company (for example, your bills are unusually high or you cannot get utility service), call (800) 782 1110. If you need legal assistance, contact your local legal services office or a private attorney. The Office of Consumer Advocate at (800) 684-6560, may also be able to assist you.

THESE ARE only some of the rights you have as a consumer of utility services.

REMEMBER. The law often changes. Each case is different. This pamphlet is meant to give you general information and not to give you specific legal advice.

Please use the information found in this brochure carefully since the law is constantly changing and the information may not accurately reflect any changes in the law that occurred following the creation and publication of the brochure.

Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network, Inc.
118 Locust Street
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Informational pamphlets on other legal topics can be found at

PALawHelp.org

Your Online Source for Legal Information and Civil Legal Aid in Pennsylvania

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What Every Utility Customer Should Know

Public Information Pamphlet #13

What if the utility company shuts off my service?

How do I know if my utilities are going to be shut off?

Can I dispute my utility bill?

Can I receive financial help in paying my utility bill?



**NEIGHBORHOOD
LEGAL SERVICES**

**Pennsylvania
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The Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network of civil legal aid programs provides help for people who have no place else to turn



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■ IF YOU have complaints about utility service, or if the company decides to shut off your service, or if the company refuses to give you service, Public Utility Commission (PUC) rules may protect you. This is true only if your utility company is covered by the PUC. Most are.

* This pamphlet deals only with utility companies covered by the PUC.

Customer Assistance Programs

Electric, gas and most regulated water companies have Customer Assistance Programs (CAPs). CAPs are available for low-income customers who have difficulty paying their full monthly bill. Although each company's CAP is called by a different name such as 'CAP Rate', 'CRP', or 'On-Track', they each provide discounts to the monthly bill as well as past debt forgiveness in exchange for the customer making regular monthly payments. Ask your company if you are eligible.

Budget payment plans

These utility companies must allow you to pay your bills on a budget plan, so that your winter payments are not extremely high while your summer payments are low. Under a budget plan, your payments are averaged so that each monthly payment is the same.

Shut-offs (Termination of Service)

If you have not paid, or if you are behind in paying your utility bills, the company can shut off the service to your home. Even if you cannot pay

the whole amount owed, you can take steps to keep your utility service on.

First . . .

The company cannot cut off service without:

- a 10-day written notice before shut-off;
- an attempt to contact you or an adult in your household personally at least three days before the shut-off;
- an attempt to contact you or an adult in your household at the time of the shut-off. During December through March, if the company has not made personal contact prior to the termination, it must post a notice in an obvious place at your house saying your utilities will be shut off in not less than 48 hours.

Second . . .

You may be able to avoid a shut off after these notices are given by contacting the utility company at the phone number in the notice. You should ask to set up a payment agreement to pay your bill in installments. The length of the payment agreement is determined by law. However, the utility company is required to provide you only one payment agreement for the same debt although they may offer as many as they choose. After you have contacted the utility, if you think the utility is not providing payment terms required by law you can call the PUC toll free at 1 (800) 692 7380. The PUC may provide you with one PUC issued payment agreement in addition to that provided by the company.

Third . . .

If you do not agree with the bill or your meter readings, you must call or write the utility company and tell them you dispute the bill. Your service may not be shut off as long as you pay any undisputed part of your bill and until your dispute is settled. If you are not able to reach an agreement with the company and settle your dispute, **immediately** call the PUC toll free at (800) 692 7380 in order to make an informal

complaint. Use of the toll free number **before termination** will provide you with immediate protection against shut off.

If you are not satisfied with the decision on your informal complaint, you can file a formal written complaint with the PUC. You should receive a formal complaint form from the PUC when it sends you its decision on your informal complaint. If not, you can get a formal complaint form by contacting the PUC or going to www.puc.state.pa.us/filing_resources/filing_complaints.aspx.

Your utilities cannot be shut off during the entire time from when you tell your utility company of your disagreement until a final decision is made, provided you arrange to pay that part of your bill(s) that you do not dispute.

Fourth . . .

Your service may not be shut off if someone in your home is seriously ill or has a medical problem that will get worse if you lose utility service. After telling the company about this health problem, you must act promptly to get a doctor or nurse practitioner to call or send a statement to the utility company about this person's health condition. This will prevent a shut off of service or restore service that has been shut-off for up to 30 days. But you still must arrange to pay any undisputed utility bills you receive. You can renew the certificate twice (90 days of protection) even if you do not pay the undisputed charges.

Fifth . . .

Low-income households (250% of the federal poverty guidelines or below) are protected from termination of gas, electric, and heat-related water service (such as a radiator heating system) in the winter (December 1 to March 31).

If you receive notice that your utilities will be shut off, act quickly to protect your rights. It may be harder to get service turned back on after a shut off. If you run into problems acting on your own or if you need some information, contact the PUC, a private attorney or your local Legal Services office.