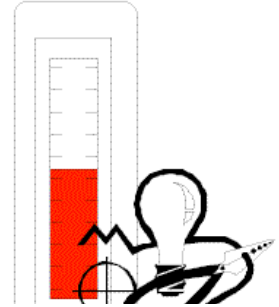


General Utility Info for PA Residents Of Limited Means

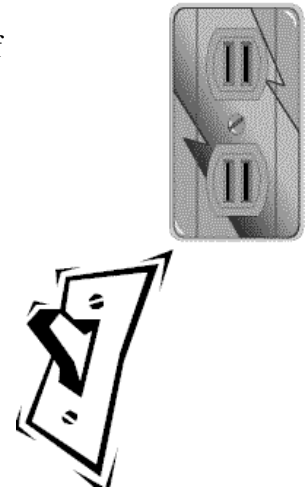


What are the energy concerns for individuals of limited incomes this coming year?

The major concern is being able to afford the cost of home heating. Energy prices have risen and are expected to continue to rise. However the incomes of individuals with limited means have not kept pace with these cost increases.

What is a "regulated company"?

In PA the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (known as 'the PUC', or 'the Commission') has the responsibility of regulating or overseeing investor owned utility companies. This includes controlling costs, assuring reliability of service and setting the rules regarding customer service, bill collection and termination or shut-off activities. Additionally, customers can file complaints against these companies with the PUC. Regulated utilities must offer assistance programs to help low income households afford energy.



Even with the passage of electric and gas choice legislation, the PUC still regulates the local electric and local natural gas distribution companies. Gas costs may fluctuate since the local gas company passes along any changes in the cost of natural gas supply to the consumer.

Are some energy suppliers unregulated?

Yes, companies that provide deliverable fuels such as oil, propane, coal and wood are not regulated, and municipal utilities as well as Rural Electric Cooperatives are beyond the PUC jurisdiction. Since many people are served by regulated utilities, this brochure will focus on the PUC rules and procedures for those companies.

As high costs are the main concern, are there things that a person of limited means can do to reduce energy usage?

Fortunately, there are a number of actions that low-income individuals can take that should make a difference. These range from actively reducing energy usage by lowering the thermostat, limiting the use of non-essential appliances, reducing the use of hot water in dishwashers and washing machines and finally, receiving formal home conservation services.

Besides adjusting the thermostat and turning off appliances that are not in use, are there other things that can be done to conserve?

In Pennsylvania, there are specifically designed services that are available for low-income residence. Those services include the Weatherization and the Low-Income Usage Reduction Programs (LIURP). These are separate programs that do very similar things and an individual may apply for either or both. An eligible individual can obtain a home energy audit, conservation education, and specific physical home treatments such as assuring a more efficient heating and hot water system, reducing the sources of heating loss, and a variety of other insulation measures. Your local gas or electric utility and usually your local community action agency, will provide these services without charge.

Well what happens if I have reduced my usage and still have difficulty affording my energy bills; is there anything else?

There are 3 things I would advise someone from every low-income household to do:

- Apply for **LIHEAP** at your local County Assistance Office or online at www.compass.state.pa.us,
- Apply for the local **Universal Service Customer Assistance Program** through your local utility, and
- Apply to the local **utility hardship fund** either through your local utility or at www.dollarenergy.org.

Every eligible person should apply for LIHEAP, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program. This program has three components, the Cash, Crisis, and Crisis Interface. An individual can get financial assistance to help in paying home heating bills, avoiding shut-offs, and repairing home heating emergencies. The program is available each year starting in November. Applications are available through the local County Assistance Office or at www.compass.state.pa.us.

In addition, by law, each local utility company is required to maintain a Customer Assistance Program. These programs have different names throughout the state such as LIPURP, EAP, LIRA, CARES, or CAP, but they all operate in essentially the same way. If you are eligible, you will be able to receive electric or gas service for rates that are significantly discounted, often based directly upon a percentage of household income.

Each utility has a toll-free number to be used in order to apply for their Universal Service Program. As long as you pay the reduced bill, you will avoid termination and in many cases receive priority placement for conservation services and other low-income programs that the utility may offer.

Paying the bill in the future is only part of my problem, what about the big bills that were run up in past years?

Many people can't possibly afford to pay that debt. One of the many beneficial features of the Customer Assistance Programs is their treatment of past debt. As long as the reduced monthly payments are made, no collection activities on the past debt will be undertaken. Furthermore, almost all the programs have an arrearage forgiveness component. In some programs for example, if you make your payments on time, 1/12 of the debt is forgiven. Therefore after 12 payments, at the end of one- year, the past debt is fully wiped out.

Can all low-income utility customers participate in Universal Service Programs?

Unfortunately, no. Certain criteria apply. For example, for most programs you must be below 150% of the Federal Poverty Income Guidelines and you must be "payment troubled". While, for the most part, these programs presently have openings, the numbers are not unlimited. That's why it is strongly suggested that all interested low-income utility customers with payments difficulties apply now.

If someone is unable to be in a Universal Service Program, do they have other alternatives for help with their bills?

They do. Every utility customer has the right to apply to the utility for a budget billing arrangement. This usually permits the utility to divide your entire bill into 10 or 12 equal payments. By this arrangement, you won't have to deal with extremely high bills during one season and low ones the next. You will be able to budget for your expected annual costs. In addition, if there are unusual temporary situations, such as illness, lay-off or other unforeseen circumstances, you may be eligible for modifications to your payment agreement. *DO NOT AGREE TO A BILLING ARRANGEMENT YOU KNOW YOU CANNOT AFFORD TO PAY.*

What if I contact the utility and I'm just not satisfied with the payment plan? Are they the last word?

Not necessarily. The law specifies the rules for payment agreements. Since companies are regulated by the PUC, if a customer believes, after contacting the company, that the rules are not being followed, that customer has the ability to go to the PUC one time to review the payment agreement.

The PUC has designated their Bureau of Consumer Services (BCS) to receive all informal complaints concerning payment agreements. You can contact BCS simply through a toll-free call at 1-800-692-7380, by writing a letter, sending an e-mail, or by filing out an online form at http://www.puc.state.pa.us/filing_resources/filing_complaints/informal_complaint_form.aspx.

They will obtain payment histories, your household expenses and income information. After reviewing the facts, BCS will issue a payment order. If you are dissatisfied with the BCS decision, you have the right to file a formal appeal.

The Utility Company has told me that I will be shut-off if I don't pay by a certain date. Getting payment arrangements and filing informal appeals takes time, won't I lose my service by the time the payment plan is settled?

No. You should never lose your service while a dispute about payment arrangements is pending. If you file your dispute at least one day before the scheduled shut-off and continue to make good faith payments of the amount of the bill not in dispute, you will continue to receive service until the final decision on your case is made.

Someone in my home is ill. Does that affect anything?

In certain circumstances, it might. A household may obtain a medical certificate to stop termination if a household member has a serious illness or medical condition which requires utility service to treat their illness. You will need to provide a letter from a licensed physician, physician's assistant, or nurse practitioner stating that shutting off your utility service will harm the ill person in the home.

A medical professional determines which conditions apply, not the utility company. The initial medical certification can be up to 30 days, with renewals possible. You will need to have your doctor recertify your condition to the utility company.

I usually don't pay for utility service directly. My landlord pays for the service, but he has hit on hard times. What happens to my service if he doesn't pay?

A tenant has the right to receive notice from the utility company before the company shuts off the tenant's service for the failure of a landlord to pay utility bills. The tenant can continue to receive service as long as he pays the bill for the last 30 days. In addition, the tenant has the right to deduct the amount of whatever utility bill he has paid from the rent. Additionally, there is protection for the tenant from retaliation (eviction) by the landlord.

Thanks to the Pennsylvania Utility Law Project for providing this information.

Disclaimer:

We have attempted to ensure the accuracy of the information in this material at the time it was created or revised. However, the law does change, sometimes quickly and unexpectedly. Therefore, you should consult an attorney before taking or refraining from any action based on the information in this pamphlet.

Last Updated: October 2018



To request service from NWLS call 1-800-665-6957, Or In Erie 814-452-6957, or Apply Online at WWW.NWLS.ORG