



Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

Your Residential Utility Consumer Advocate

CONSUMER FACT SHEET

Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

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YOUR GUIDE TO ENERGY DISCONNECTION & RECONNECTION



You are not alone if you struggle to pay electric and natural gas bills. The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, provides this fact sheet to inform consumers about their important rights and responsibilities involving disconnection issues and bill payment assistance opportunities.

Coronavirus pandemic update

In response to the coronavirus pandemic—and at the request of Gov. DeWine, the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel and others—Ohio utility companies temporarily suspended disconnections for non-payment in March 2020. Utilities have since resumed disconnections according to transition plans filed with the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio. **OCC urges any consumer who is behind on their utility bills to contact their utility company** and request a payment extension or arrangement that will work for the consumer as they catch up on any past-due bills.

In addition to the rights and resources listed in this fact sheet, last year Congress passed the CARES Act, which provides

utility and rental assistance to eligible consumers. Then, in December 2020, Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which provides an additional \$25 billion for these and other critical needs.

Consumers are encouraged to contact ODSA, their Community Action Agency (at www.energyhelp.ohio.gov), Job and Family Services agency, municipal government and county commissioners about the availability of these and other resources.

Disconnection

Disconnection of utility services can occur any time of year, even if elderly people or small children are in the home. Most utilities have their own policies and procedures regarding the disconnection of service if the temperature is below a certain level, but there is no state guideline or statute regarding this issue. Further, there is not a standard temperature that is used by all utility companies across the state; it may be a different temperature for each company. Consumers are therefore advised to take any official disconnection notice seriously, regardless of the season.

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Utility Assistance Administrators

**Community Action
Agencies (by county)**
www.energyhelp.ohio.gov

**Public Utilities
Commission of Ohio**
1-800-686-7826
puco.ohio.gov

**Ohio Development
Services Agency**
1-800-282-0880
www.development.ohio.gov

There are several reasons electric and natural gas utilities are permitted to disconnect service, including:

- ▶ Failure to pay the bill and the utility company has followed proper disconnection notification procedures and other requirements;
- ▶ Relocated from the premises or requested that service be disconnected;
- ▶ Repairs are needed, including scheduled maintenance, or a dangerous condition exists; or
- ▶ Tampering with company equipment or violation of other utility regulations.

However, you cannot be disconnected or denied reconnection based on the past due bills of a former customer who no longer resides in the home.

Medical certification waiver

When disconnection of utility service would be especially dangerous for health reasons to you or someone in your home, certification by a medical professional to keep services connected can be provided up to three times in any 12-month period. Certification forms must be completed for each case of disconnection or reconnection, are valid for 30 days each, and are available from the utility company or a public health facility. This certification will prevent a shutoff or restore service within 21 days of termination of service in certain circumstances.

Disconnection notice

When facing a disconnection of service, certain requirements must be followed by the utility company to ensure you have an opportunity to work out a payment plan and avoid losing your electric or natural gas service.

- ▶ You have at least 14 days to pay each month's bill. If payment is not received by the time the next bill is generated, the company may begin the disconnection process.

- ▶ The company must provide you with a notice at least 14 days before disconnection. This notice can either appear as a message on your bill or be sent separately.
- ▶ The electric or natural gas company must attempt to personally contact you before disconnection. The representative from the company may be able to accept payment at that time, but that person may not be required to accept a cash payment at the residence. If you are not at home at the time, a written notice must be left in a visible location prior to disconnecting service. Companies are not required to conduct an in-person visit prior to disconnecting service to a residence with a smart meter and are permitted instead to contact the customer by phone or text message.
- ▶ Disconnection can only be made during normal business hours.
- ▶ During the winter heating season (Nov. 1 – April 15), consumers are entitled to a second notice of ten days prior to shut-off. The company must make contact either with the customer or other adult at the premise at least 10 days prior to disconnection. Contact can be in person, over the telephone or a hand-delivered written notice. This provides additional time for the consumer to work out a payment plan.

Payment plans

Utilities are encouraged to work out an extended payment plan with you. If you face disconnection and cannot work out an individualized payment plan, electric and natural gas companies must make available the following payment arrangements:

- ▶ Either a "one-ninth", "one-sixth", or "one-third" plan.
- ▶ The one-ninth plan allows customers to make nine equal monthly payments on the past due amount and places them on a budget plan.

The budget plan is based on a nine or 12-month calculation and may be adjusted as needed during the nine-month period.

- ▶ The one-sixth plan allows consumers to pay their past due amounts over six months. Consumers on this plan are required to pay their current bill, plus one-sixth of their past due balance.
- ▶ All regulated electric and natural gas companies are required to offer the one-third plan during the winter heating season (Nov. 1 – April 15). The one-third plan allows households to pay one third of the total balance due each month (past due amount plus current charges) during the winter heating season. Any past-due amounts remaining after the winter heating season is over can be re-calculated using either the one-ninth or one sixth plans.
- ▶ **The Percentage of Income Payment Plan Plus (PIPP Plus)** - A year-round program that allows income-eligible customers to pay a percentage of their household's monthly income rather than a bill based on their actual usage. Households with an income at or below 150 percent of the federal income guidelines are eligible. Contact your local Community Action Agency (CAA) to enroll in the PIPP Plus Program (To locate your local CAA contact the Ohio Development Services Agency (ODSA) at 1-800-282-0880 or at www.energyhelp.ohio.gov).

Assistance programs

- ▶ **HEAP (Home Energy Assistance Program)** – Provides a one-time payment toward winter heating bills for consumers who have a household income at or below 175 percent of the federal income guidelines.
- ▶ **Winter Crisis Program** – Formerly known as E-HEAP or Emergency HEAP, this program provides

consumers with energy assistance once per heating season for eligible households that have been disconnected or face disconnection in order to have their service restored or maintained. The Winter Crisis Program is available from November 1 to March 31 and follows the same income guidelines as the regular HEAP program. **New in 2021** – Eligibility for the Winter Crisis Program has been expanded to include households with a member diagnosed with COVID-19 in 2020-21.

- ▶ **Summer Crisis Program** – Depending on the availability of funds, the Summer Crisis Program provides assistance to some income-eligible consumers between July 1 and August 31.
- ▶ Many electric and natural gas companies offer their own energy assistance programs sometimes known as 'fuel funds'. Check out the OCC Fuel Funds fact sheet (http://www.occ.ohio.gov/sites/default/files/publications/assistance_programs/Fuel_Funds.pdf) for more information or call your utility company and ask if they offer energy-assistance fuel funds.

Reconnection

If you notify your utility and pay the amount due and any additional reconnection charges, service must be restored by the end of the next business day. You can request same-day reconnection if your payment is made and the utility is notified by 12:30 p.m. If you choose to make your payment at an authorized payment location, you must call in a specific receipt number to the utility for same- or next-day reconnection. A list of authorized payment locations can be obtained through your utility. Same-day reconnections also may require that you agree to pay any additional charges for any work that must be performed after business hours.

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Utility Contact Information

American Electric Power
1-800-672-2231
www.aepohio.com

Cleveland Electric Illuminating
1-800-589-3101
www.firstenergycorp.com

Columbia Gas of Ohio
1-800-344-4077
www.columbiagasohio.com

Dayton Power & Light
1-800-433-8500
www.dpandl.com

Dominion East Ohio Gas
1-800-362-7557
www.dominionenergy.com

Duke Energy Ohio
1-800-544-6900
www.duke-energy.com

Ohio Edison
1-800-633-4766
www.firstenergycorp.com

Toledo Edison
1-800-447-3333
www.firstenergycorp.com

Vectren Energy Delivery of Ohio
1-800-227-1376
www.vectren.com

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The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts.

The state agency also educates consumers about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues.

For more information, please visit the OCC website at www.occ.ohio.gov.



The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel is an equal opportunity employer and provider of services.

If your service has been disconnected for more than ten business days, the utility may consider you as a new customer and:

- ▶ Reconnect your natural gas service within five days;
- ▶ Reconnect your electric service within three days; and
- ▶ Reconnection fees would apply.

Reconnection charges

- ▶ Each company may charge a fee for reconnection. Generally, this fee is between \$15 and \$52. You also may be required to pay a deposit. This deposit cannot exceed one month's estimated charges plus 30 percent.
- ▶ **Winter Reconnection Order (WRO)** - Allows consumers of investor-owned utilities to avoid disconnection, or to reconnect service, by paying \$175 of the total amount owed, plus a reconnection fee of no more than \$36 (if the company's reconnection fee is greater than \$36, the remainder can be charged on the customers next bill). This can be used once per heating season, typically between mid-October and mid-April. All electric and natural gas customers served by investor-owned utilities that meet the above criteria are eligible to use the WRO regardless of income. Income-eligible consumers who use this option may also use Winter Crisis Program funds to cover the \$175 payment and must also sign up for HEAP and enroll in a payment plan for remaining amounts due. **New in 2020:** PIPP Plus customers with a balance greater than \$175 will have the remaining amount owed transferred to their PIPP Plus arrearages and will not be required to pay the balance on their next PIPP Plus bill as in years past.

More information

The Home Weatherization Assistance Program (HWAP) provides funding for energy efficiency home inspections and repairs that can save consumers energy and money.

For more information about HWAP, the WRO or to learn more about PIPP Plus and HEAP, customers can visit our website at www.occ.ohio.gov for our current fact sheets. Consumers can follow OCC on Twitter @OCC4Consumers. The OCC does not administer any utility assistance programs.

Information about other local assistance programs may be available by contacting your local Community Action Agency (CAA). To find the CAA in your area, search by county at www.energyhelp.ohio.gov.

Consumers can also contact the Public Utility Commission of Ohio (PUCO) about utility assistance programs or to get help resolving a dispute or complaint with a utility company. Contact the PUCO at 1-800-686-7826 or at puco.ohio.gov. The PUCO administers the natural gas PIPP Plus program.

You are also encouraged to contact the Ohio Development Services Agency (ODSA) at 1-800-282-0880 or visit their website at www.development.ohio.gov. ODSA administers the HEAP and Electric PIPP Plus programs.