

Pa. doesn't protect against utility shutoffs; here's how residents can get help [Lancaster Watchdog]

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Like many expectant mothers, Shauntasia Morant spent the weeks before her May 21 due date preparing for her son's arrival.

Among those preparations: applying to utility, food and financial assistance programs. The single mother, who works as a certified nursing assistant at Mennonite Home Community, says she was repeatedly denied for not meeting income requirements.

"They keep saying I make too much when I'm like, every dollar or penny I get goes straight into bills," 32-year-old Morant, of Lancaster, said earlier this month. "I am terrified [that] come July, I could have my electric turned off, and now I have a baby."

Neighboring New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware have [temperature-based shutoff restrictions](#) during extreme heat. In Pennsylvania, there is only a state-level protection that protects against utility shutoffs during specific winter months. For some Lancaster County residents, this leaves them struggling to keep their utilities on during the rest of the year – including in the potentially dangerous summer heat.

While electric utility prices are poised to drop in June, some Lancaster County residents may still struggle to keep their electric on.

Between Dec. 1 and March 31, utilities that are controlled by the Public Utility Commission cannot be shut off in income-eligible Pennsylvania households unless the utility receives permission

from PUC. Commonly referred to as the winter shutoff moratorium, it was enacted Nov. 30, 2004, and is scheduled to expire Dec. 14, 2024.

State Rep. Robert Matzie, the Democratic Chair for Consumer Affairs who serves part of Beaver County, is sponsoring [House Bill 1077](#), which would extend the moratorium through 2034. The bill would also prevent a reconnection fee for anyone at or below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level, which for a single-person household in 2023 is an annual income of \$40,770. (The Federal Poverty Level for a single-person household in 2023 is an annual income of \$33,975.) The bill also would add a summer termination moratorium from July 1 through Aug. 31 that would prevent anyone at or below 250% of the Federal Poverty Level.

Rep. Mike Sturla, a Democrat who represents East Petersburg and Manheim Townships as well as part of Lancaster city, said that he would be in favor of the legislation if it came to a vote in front of him.

“We always want to try to keep things as affordable as possible,” Sturla said.

It would take legislative action for PUC to enforce a suspension of summer months or a high temperature utility shutoffs, confirmed Nils Hagen-Frederiksen, press secretary with the office of communications for PUC.

While Morant said she is blessed to have a support system that would take her in if her electricity was to be shut off during summer months, she does not want to have to rely on them. She works full time, and therefore said she feels like she should be able to afford her own bills. But multiple bills are rising; her rent, as an example, recently went up \$30.

“It should absolutely be more affordable to live in Pennsylvania, and that is especially true when we are talking about the skyrocketing costs Pennsylvanians pay to heat and cool their

homes and turn the lights on,” state Rep. Bryan Cutler, a Peach Bottom Republican, said.

Between June 1 and Aug. 21, 2022, there were 20 days that reached or exceeded 90 degrees at Millersville University, said Kyle Elliott, Millersville University weather information center director. In the same time period, Lancaster Airport in Lititz had 29 days at or exceeding 90 degrees.

Potential medical risks include heat cramps, or muscle spasms caused by a large loss of salt and water in the body (dehydration); heat exhaustion, which is severe and may require emergency medical treatment; and heat stroke, which is deadly and requires emergency medical treatment, according to the [American Red Cross](#).

According to the American Red Cross, older adults, infants, children, pregnant women, people with medical conditions, outdoor workers, people with limited personal resources and people living in places that lack green spaces are at highest risk.

Emilio Vargas, 74, moved to Lancaster from Puerto Rico in 1971. His wife, Virginia 72, joined him a year later. Virginia is on disability for a back problem and Emilio worked as a maintenance worker at McCaskey High School until he retired.

Now on a fixed income, Vargas makes \$1,300 monthly. He pays \$880 in rent, which was raised by \$30 in May, and \$65 to PPL through their budget planning program. He says what's left goes to vehicle and medical expenses. His wife's monthly disability check covers cable and phone bills. For groceries, Vargas relies on programs hosted at Bright Side Opportunity Center, the Spanish American Civic Association and Alpha & Omega Church. Without the food pantries, he said, he would not be able to cover his living expenses.

“I get angry because it’s overwhelming and frustrating,” Vargas said through a translator. “It gets stressful because I’m running

and going and trying to make ends meet. There's that frustration like, what else can I do?"

Morant, the single mother, can relate. She said she goes to bed thinking about bills and wakes up thinking about bills – especially her electric bill, which she said is one emergency bill away from not being able to pay during potentially dangerous summer months where her bill is higher to keep the apartment cool for her baby.

Vargas and Morant said that they know they are not the only ones facing financial stresses in Lancaster County. But both said they want people to know they are not alone.

"I am robbing Peter to pay Paul every month," Morant said of balancing her bills.

The possibility of having any type of law to protect against a shutoff during hotter temperatures would relax her, Morant said.

"I would still be paying because nothing's free," Morant said. "But I would be so at ease knowing OK, I can give them this amount of money. I can afford this amount and it's never gonna get shut off."

WHO QUALIFIES FOR HELP?

If House Bill 1077 is passed, it will renew the winter shutoff moratorium through 2034. The bill would also add a summer termination moratorium from July 1 through Aug. 31, which would prevent anyone at or below the 250% of the Federal Poverty Level. The Federal Poverty Level for a single-person household in 2023 is \$33,975.

Additionally, other programs like PPL's OnTrack program requires participants be at or below 150% of the Federal Poverty Level. Here's a look at how those income markers break down.

Number of persons	150% FPL	200% FPL
living in Household	(2023)	(2023)

1	\$21,870	\$29,160
2	\$29,580	\$39,440
3	\$37,290	\$49,720
4	\$45,000	\$60,000
5	\$52,710	\$70,280

PREVENTING A SHUTOFF

In Pennsylvania between January and April 2022 there were 35,184 electric shutoffs and 25,407 reconnections, [according to PUC](#). Between January and April 2023, there were 24,820 electric shutoffs and 18,556 reconnections. As of April 30, 2023 there were 5,283,687 residential PUC regulated electric utilities in Pennsylvania.

PPL does not provide the number of shutoffs per county, said Margaret Sheely, regional affairs director for PPL, when asked for the information.

“It's important that customers reach out to us if they know that they're going to be experiencing financial hardship,” Sheely, said.

PPL will attempt to alert customers multiple times before any shutoffs and encouraged customers in those situations to contact and work with PPL, Sheely said.

“Sometimes customers might be afraid to call because maybe you don't know that there are programs or you're just overwhelmed,” Sheely said. “But shutoff is the absolute last resort.”

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is a federal program that provides grants to households to help with home energy bills or to pay off past-due balances. The application ended May 12.

If someone is behind on a utility bill, they can avoid a shutoff or have services turned back on if there is a [medical emergency](#) in the household. To be considered a medical emergency, someone in the household must be seriously ill or have a medical condition that will be worsened if they do not have public utility service. A medical certificate signed by a medical professional is required to be submitted to the utility company.

This process will postpone a pending shutoff for a maximum of 30 days and be renewed for 30 day periods after. If someone does not pay current bills or budget bill amount, the utility is not required to accept more than two medical certification renewals.

All PPL customers can apply for budget billing, which averages out a monthly payment for the year. PPL also offers OnTrack payment plan, a PPL Electric program that makes managing energy bills easier with lower fixed monthly payments and debt forgiveness, and Operation HELP, a fund supported by donations from PPL Electric, its employees, and customers, that provides grants to help with energy bills. Additionally, PPL offers consultations on how to make a space more energy efficient.

Some residents may also be able to get financial help through the [Emergency Rental Assistance Program \(ERAP\)](#), a federal program that helps renters affected by financial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic to cover rent, utility bills, fees and past-due balances.

Community Action Partnership's [Outreach Utility Assistance program](#) provides emergency assistance and service planning to people facing financial hardships. The program provides support with utility payments for PPL and UGI customers to help reduce utility debt and arrange for more manageable payment options going forward. CAP works with PPL OnTrack program as well as the Hardship Fund also known as Operation Help. Both programs do have income eligibility restrictions. For OnTrack income needs to be at or below 150% of the Federal Poverty Level. For a single person household that is an annual income of \$21,870. For the

Hardship Fund or Operation Help income needs to be at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. For a single person household that is an annual income of \$29,160.

CAP assists about 1,000 homes a month with utility assistance programs for PPL services, said Crystal Werhel, director of Outreach Utility Assistance at CAP.

"I know human nature and that people do wait till the last minute," Werhel said. "But start now. If you really are going to have a concern, really start thinking about these programs and applying for now."

Werhel said that they see a lot of vulnerability and hopelessness in their office with the customers who go to CAP for utility assistance. Many of them are families that they help, not just individuals, she said.

"I think the perception of what we do as being handouts and people abusing the system but that's a fallacy," Werhel said. "Everyone is feeling the pinch with prices rising and now I have a decent paying job...I can pay my bills and I haven't had to decide whether to buy groceries or pay my electric bill. But that's the reality of so many families walking in our doors."

Werhel said that shutoffs affect the whole family because it is not just the cooling but then the kids can't eat either.

"We have the resources we need right under our feet to lower the price of energy and thereby make it more affordable to pay for utilities," state Rep. Bryan Cutler, R-Peach Bottom, said. "Increasing production of our home-grown energy resources and finding new ways to get those products to market brought down the price of energy and related utilities in the past and it can again with smart policies that put real energy affordability first."

RESOURCES/MORE INFORMATION

Here's where to go for more information on programs that assist households in need with utility bills.

PPL: ppllectric.com/billhelp.

Community Action Partnership: caplanc.org/utilities.

Food banks: To find a food bank near you, visit foodpantries.org/ci/pa-lancaster.

Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program: Call 1-866-857-7095 or go to lanc.news/LIHEAP.

LIHEAP document to compare states seasonal termination protection regulations: lanc.news/LIHEAPdisconnect.

HEAT ILLNESSES

Here's a guide to common illnesses caused from exposure to high temperatures, and how to address them.

Heat Cramps

Muscle spasms caused by a large loss of salt and water in the body.

Symptoms:

Heavy sweating with muscle pain or spasms

What to do:

Move to a cool place.

Drink water or a sports drink

Get medical help right away if:

Cramps last longer than 1 hour

Person affected has heart problem

Heat Exhaustion

Severe and may require emergency medical treatment.

Symptoms:

Heavy sweating

Cold, pale and clammy skin

Fast, weak pulse

Nausea or vomiting

Muscle cramps

Tiredness or weakness

Dizziness. Headache. Passing out

What to do:

Move to a cool place

Loosen tight clothing

Cool the body using wet cloths, misting, fanning, or a cool bath

Sip water slowly

Get medical help right away if:

Vomiting occurs

Symptoms last longer than 1 hour or get worse

Confusion develops

Heat Stroke

Deadly and requires emergency medical treatment.

Symptoms:

High body temperature (104°F or higher)

Hot, red, dry or damp skin

Fast, strong pulse

Headache.Dizziness

Nausea.Confusion. Passing out

What to do:

Call 911 right away, then:

Move to a cool place

Cool the body using wet cloths, misting, fanning, or a cool bath

Do NOT give the person anything to drink

Source: American Red Cross.