



Utility Information for Ohio Senior Citizens

The following information is provided to inform seniors about common utility issues and programs that are available to assist with utility bills.

About the PUCO

The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) affects just about every household in Ohio. That's because the PUCO regulates providers of all kinds of utility services, including electric and natural gas companies, local and long distance telephone companies, water and wastewater companies, and rail and trucking companies.

The PUCO can help resolve disputes between you, the consumer, and regulated utility companies and utility service providers including the industries of electric, natural gas, telephone, water, and household goods moving. The PUCO can:

- Act as a mediator to help solve disputes between you and a utility company;
- Assist you in setting up available payment plans for your utility bill;
- Provide rules and regulations governing utility companies;
- Provide information about public hearings and how you can participate;
- Provide information regarding the status of pending rate cases.

How do you contact the PUCO?

You can call the PUCO Consumer Call Center toll free (in Ohio) Monday through Friday between 8:00 a.m. and 5:30 p.m.

(800) 686-PUCO (7826)

(800) 686-1570 (TDD)

You can write us at:

Public Utilities Commission of Ohio
180 E. Broad Street, 7th Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43215

You can fax us 24 hours a day at (614) 752-8351 or visit our Web site at www.PUCO.ohio.gov.

Energy Assistance Programs

Having trouble paying your utility bill? Assistance is available for both gas and electric bills. The assistance may be in the form of a reduction of your heating bill and/or a set amount to be paid each month based on your income. One or more of the following programs may be right for you:

- Percentage of Income Payment Plan Plus (PIPP Plus)
- The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP)
- Emergency Energy Assistance Plans
- Extended Payment Plans

Percentage of Income Payment Plan Plus (PIPP Plus)

If you qualify, PIPP Plus can make your make monthly natural gas or electric payments more affordable on a year-round basis. And if you make your monthly PIPP Plus payment on-time and in-full, some of your old PIPP debt and the rest of that month's bill will go away in the form of a credit to your utility account.

How do you sign up for PIPP?

Contact your local energy assistance program provider. You may also enroll in PIPP Plus by completing the Energy Assistance Program application and mailing it to The Ohio Department of Development. You must provide proof of your gross monthly household income for at least the last three months. To find your local energy assistance program provider or to obtain an application, please call (800) 282-0880 or visit <http://development.ohio.gov/cdd/ocs/energyhelp.htm>.

The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP)

HEAP is a federally funded program administered by the Ohio Department of Development. It is designed to help eligible low-income Ohioans meet the high costs of home heating. HEAP pays a one-time payment for customers of most PUCO-regulated utilities.

How do you apply for HEAP?

You can call HEAP at:

(800) 282-0880

(800) 686-1557 (TDD)

You can write HEAP at:

P.O. Box 1240, Columbus, Ohio 43215

You can also obtain a HEAP application from county-based community action agencies, post offices, or libraries.

Non-Income Based Energy Assistance Programs

PUCO-regulated gas and electric companies have the following extended payment plans available to help you to make affordable payments and maintain service:

- The One-third Plan, or Winter Heating Season Plan, is only offered from November 1 to April 15 and requires you to pay 1/3 of your total account balance each month.
- The One-sixth Plan requires you to pay six equal monthly payments on your past due amount in addition to your monthly budget payment.
- The One-ninth Plan requires you to pay nine equal monthly payments on your past due amount in addition to your monthly budget payment.

These plans are available to all residential customers regardless of income. For more information, contact your utility company or your local Community Action Agency. Some utility companies may offer other emergency assistance plans. For more information, please contact your utility company.

Natural Gas and Electric Choice

Natural gas choice programs for Cincinnati Gas & Electric, Columbia Gas of Ohio, Dominion East Ohio, and Vectren Energy Delivery of Ohio, allow you to choose your natural gas supplier. Your local natural gas utility will continue to deliver the gas to your home or business.

Where there are competing suppliers, electric choice gives you the opportunity to choose your electric supplier. That electricity is still delivered to you by your local electric utility, but you choose the company that supplies your electricity.

The PUCO produces Apples to Apples charts (for natural gas and electric choice) to provide consumers with a "snapshot" comparison of current supplier price options, contract terms, and an estimated annual total cost. To obtain a chart visit the PUCO Web site at www.PUCO.ohio.gov or call (800) 686-PUCO (7826).

Whether you stay with your local utility or switch to another supplier, your local utility will continue to respond to your natural gas or electric safety concerns. The PUCO is committed to ensuring that customers continue to receive safe, reliable, and adequate natural gas and electric service.

Energy Conservation Tips

By conserving energy you can save money and save the environment. The PUCO provides the following tips that have been known to reduce energy costs significantly:

Electric Conservation

- Have the air conditioning system checked by a professional to ensure that it is working at peak efficiency.
- When possible, delay heat-generating activities such as cooking and dishwashing until the evening on hot days.
- Buy energy efficient cooling units.
- Keep refrigerator doors closed as much as possible.
- Operate the dishwasher with a full load and use the energy-saving cycle whenever possible.

- Use the air-dry option if your dishwasher has it.
- When the manufacturer recommends it, insulate your hot water storage tank and pipes, being careful not to cover the tank's thermostat.
- Lower the thermostat on your water heater to 120 degrees.

Natural Gas Conservation

- Check to make sure that your walls are properly insulated.
- Set your thermostat to 68 degrees or lower when you are not at home.
- Check the furnace filter monthly and change it when necessary.
- Seal drafty windows with plastic.
- Replace damaged weather-stripping on doors and windows.
- Have your chimney checked for blockage.
- Make sure attic access is insulated and weather-stripped.
- Insulate your basement/crawl space walls.
- Have your heating system checked and tuned-up if needed.
- Keep all heat registers and air ducts clear from obstructions.

Water Conservation Tips

By conserving water you can save money, energy, and the environment. The PUCO offers the following simple tips to help you use water wisely inside and outside your home:

- Repair or replace leaky toilets.
- Install a low-flow showerhead and take only 5-minute showers or 3-inch baths.
- Check for leaks regularly and have them fixed immediately.
- Only run the dishwasher when it is fully loaded.
- Repair dripping faucets.

- Run the clothes washer when it is fully loaded or use the load selector to match the water level to the size of the load.
- Do not overuse detergent because additional rinsing may be required.
- Do not over water your lawn.
- Use a nozzle on your hose that can be shut off or adjusted to a fine spray.
- Use a broom rather than a hose to clean sidewalks and driveways.

Telephone Assistance Programs

The Lifeline Assistance Program provides eligible customers with a discount on their monthly basic telephone rate, a waiver of deposit fees and charges for telephone service connection and provides free toll blocking and 900 or 976 blocking. Contact your local telephone company to see if you qualify for Lifeline.

You may qualify for Lifeline if your household income is at or below 135 percent of the [federal poverty guidelines](#) or if you participate in one of the following assistance programs:

- Medicaid
- Food stamps
- General Assistance
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Federal Public Housing Assistance/Section 8
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF/Ohio Works First)
- National School Free Lunch Program (NSL)
- Home Energy Assistance Programs (HEAP, LIHEAP and E-HEAP)

The Lifeline discount will apply to only one telephone line per principle place of residence. Keep in mind that the amount of the discount varies by local telephone company, and some restrictions may apply to your service.

Many of Ohio's landline telephone companies offer an enhanced Lifeline program that includes an additional monthly basic telephone rate discount. You

may qualify for this enhanced program if your household income is at or below 150 percent of the [poverty guidelines](#) or if you receive benefits from any of the above assistance programs or from the Supplemental Security Income-Blind and Disabled (SSDI) or General Assistance, including Disability Assistance

Telephone Cramming and Slamming

Cramming is the illegal practice of adding charges to your telephone bill for services that you did not order. Slamming is the illegal practice of changing your local or long distance telephone service without your permission.

To prevent cramming and slamming, examine your monthly bill and make sure you understand every charge. Look for unfamiliar company names, calls you did not make, or services you did not order.

If you discover that you have been slammed or crammed, contact the utility company immediately to resolve the problem. If you need assistance, contact the PUCO Consumer Call Center at (800) 686-PUCO (7826).

Telephone Savings Tips

- Check to see if there are any other local telephone companies offering service in your area
- You may be able to obtain telephone service from a provider other than your traditional or incumbent telephone company. If you are considering switching telephone service providers, make sure you inquire about the local calling area, the base monthly service charge, additional services offered by the company, and the company's repair and maintenance policies. You should also inquire about the amount of any taxes and surcharges that will be on your bill. Make sure that the calling plans offered by the company meet your calling and budget needs. Call the PUCO or log on to www.PUCO.ohio.gov to see which companies may be offering service in your area.
- Explore all the rates and packages offered by telephone companies

- If you make a lot of calls and use premium features, packages may offer substantial discounts over what you might otherwise pay. If you do not make many calls, a local usage-based service, such as message or measured rate service, may be provided at a cheaper rate.
- Evaluate your needs before ordering premium services
- Charges for options like call waiting, call forwarding, and caller ID can add up on your bill. If you are interested in these features, inquire about packages that may include them.
- Check your bill for equipment rentals
- Many customers are still renting telephones and other equipment from the telephone company. You may find that it is less expensive to purchase your own.
- Have your telephone number listed in the directory instead of unlisted
- Most local telephone companies require you to pay a fee to have your number unlisted. If you choose to keep your number listed, be aware that many companies use the directory listings to generate telemarketing call lists. To limit telemarketing calls, register your name on the National Do Not Call Registry by calling (888) 382-1222, or logging on to www.donotcall.gov.
- Use the telephone book to look up local numbers instead of using directory assistance
- Most companies charge per-call fees every time you call directory assistance.
- Dial direct
- There are additional charges for all operator-assisted, collect, and credit card calls and calls billed to another number.

Keep Your Telephone Turned On

If you are facing disconnection, you can keep local-only service if you pay outstanding regulated local charges. This does not include any long distance,

directory advertising, cellular, voicemail, internet, 900 number charges or inside wire maintenance charges billed by the company. You may also make payment arrangements with the local service provider for your outstanding charges. You will not be able to make long distance calls until your long distance charges are paid or until a payment arrangement is made with your long distance company. If you've lost your service and want to have local service restored, you must pay all outstanding regulated local service charges owed to your local service provider, pay any applicable reconnection charges, and pay a deposit if required by the local service provider.

If you would like to know more about the PUCO or have utility-related questions or concerns, contact the PUCO at:

(800) 686-PUCO (7826)
(800) 686-1570 (TDD/TTY)
In Columbus only:
(614) 466-3292
(614) 466-8180 (TDD/TTY)

www.PUCO.ohio.gov