



The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio *Your one-stop utility resource*

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The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio

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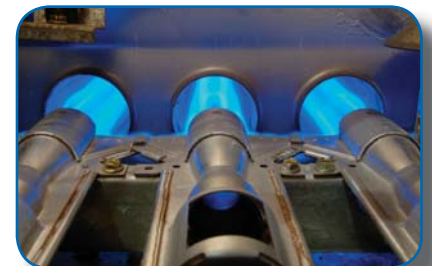
Don't get caught in the cold this winter

With winter weather here, Ohioans are thinking about heating bills and ways they can minimize the impact that cold temperatures have on their wallets. Throughout the heating season, the PUCO suggests that consumers “Keep PACE with winter heating bills” through **Preparation**, researching **Assistance programs**, looking into **Choice** programs and practicing **Energy conservation**.

Winter reconnect order keeps utility service connected

Now until mid-April, Ohio natural gas and electric customers who have had their service disconnected or who have been threatened with disconnection may use the PUCO's winter reconnect order to restore their service. Beginning this year, customers wishing to establish natural gas or electric service for the first time may also use the winter reconnect order.

The plan allows customers to keep their service maintained by paying \$175 plus a service reconnection fee of no more than \$20. Customers who owe less than \$175 can keep their service turned on by paying the amount that is owed.



Gas burner on a high-efficiency furnace

Customers requesting new natural gas or electric service, who have no previous balance with their utility, may establish service under the winter reconnect order by paying \$175, rather than paying the required security deposit. Such customers may have the remaining balance of the security deposit added to their next month's bill.

Anyone, regardless of income, may use the winter reconnect order once during the winter heating season. Participants are required to sign up for a payment plan to pay the balance on their utility bill. For more information about the winter reconnect order, visit www.PUCO.ohio.gov or Ohio's Winter Heating Resource Center site at www.winterheat.ohio.gov.



Ohio's Winter Heating Resource Center

www.winterheat.ohio.gov

Ohioans are encouraged to visit www.winterheat.ohio.gov, Ohio's winter heating resource center, for complete access to information about the winter heating season. This Web site compiles winter heating resources from state agencies including the PUCO, the Office of the Consumers' Counsel, the Ohio departments of Development, Job and Family Services and Aging.

Energy assistance programs help those in need

State and federal assistance programs are available to help pay for both natural gas and electric bills. By taking the time to research the programs and qualifications now, customers will be able to apply for and receive the assistance they need this winter. The following information outlines the benefits and qualifications for each program. More information is available at www.PUCO.ohio.gov and www.winterheat.ohio.gov.

Home Energy Assistance Plan

The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) is a federal program administered by the Ohio Department of Development. HEAP-eligible customers can receive a one-time assistance payment based on usage to help pay for heating bills. HEAP applications can be found at local community action agencies, post offices and libraries throughout the state. Each household should only submit one HEAP application per winter heating season.

Emergency Home Energy Assistance Program

The Emergency Home Energy Assistance Program (EHEAP) is a special component of HEAP that provides assistance to eligible households that are disconnected or being threatened with disconnection, or are in need of bulk fuel supplies. Customers should contact their local community action agency for more information.

Percentage of Income Payment Plan

The Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP) allows eligible customers to pay a certain percentage of their monthly income for natural gas and electric service. Eligible customers will pay 10 percent of their income for the primary heating source and 5 percent for the secondary heating source during the winter heating season. To qualify for PIPP, customers must apply for all energy assistance programs that they are eligible for and have a gross yearly household income at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level.

Home Weatherization Assistance Program

The Home Weatherization Assistance Program provides education and funding to help low-income households conserve energy and lower their monthly bills. Through this program, customers may qualify for services such as insulation, air leakage reduction, heating system repairs or replacements and health and safety testing. •

Take advantage of natural gas choice

Ohio has one of the most successful natural gas choice programs in the nation. Customers of Columbia Gas of Ohio, Dominion East Ohio, Vectren Energy Delivery of Ohio and Duke Energy Ohio, can choose the company that serves their natural gas needs. These suppliers may be able to offer natural gas at a cheaper rate than the local natural gas utility. The local distribution company continues to maintain pipes, read meters and bill customers.

Comparing suppliers

The PUCO publishes the *Apples to Apples* charts each week to offer consumers a look at the current PUCO-certified suppliers actively enrolling new customers in each service territory. On the *Apples to Apples* charts, customers can see the price options, total rate and contract terms that each supplier is offering and calculate the estimated monthly natural gas costs for suppliers through an interactive calculator. The *Apples to Apples* charts are available at www.PUCO.ohio.gov or by calling (800) 686-PUCO.

Tips for choosing a natural gas supplier

When choosing a supplier, there are a few things the customer should keep in mind before signing a contract:

- Be aware of any deposit requirements, early termination fees or other fees associated with switching.
- Make sure the supplier is certified by the PUCO.
- Understand if the contract is for a fixed or variable rate, and how the rate will change.
- Be aware of any built-in price increases or decreases or special add-on services.
- Understand how long the contract lasts, if service covers all months of the year and what happens when the contract expires.

Customers who are enrolled in the natural gas choice program should contact their local natural gas utility for issues such as gas leaks, billing questions, metering or other service issues. Questions or information regarding natural gas supply contracts should be directed to the supplier. Contact information for all companies is available on the *Apples to Apples* charts at www.PUCO.ohio.gov. •



New gas rates explained

This fall, the PUCO adopted agreements that allow Columbia Gas of Ohio, Dominion East Ohio and Duke Energy Ohio and to increase the rates they charge for natural gas distribution service. The companies will also implement a new “levelized” residential distribution rate structure that better reflects the fixed cost nature of delivering natural gas. Before adopting the agreements, the PUCO listened to hundreds of consumers and took their testimony into consideration at hearings held across Ohio.

Natural gas bills are comprised of two main parts – the cost of the gas and the cost of delivering the gas to homes. The distribution rate pays for all the things that the utility company must do to deliver natural gas to customers, including the cost of installing and maintaining gas pipelines, reading gas meters, processing bills, and taking customer service calls.

Previously, a fixed monthly customer charge paid for a portion of the gas delivery costs. This fee covered things like meter reading, billing and customer service. The remaining cost of delivering natural gas, including installing, maintaining and repairing the pipeline system, was billed to customers based upon the amount of gas they used each month. This resulted in customers paying for more of the costs of delivery during the winter, when bills are at their highest.

Under the new “levelized” distribution rate, customers will pay a flat monthly charge to cover their share of the fixed distribution costs that do not change with natural gas usage. A lower usage-based gas delivery charge will make up the remainder of the distribution rate. The flat monthly charge will help balance out, or “levelize,” between the summer and winter, allowing customers to better predict and budget for bills from month-to-month.

The cost of natural gas, which makes up 75 to 80 percent of bills, will continue to be passed on to customers through Dominion’s standard service offer charge, Columbia and Duke’s gas cost recovery charge, or a gas marketer’s rate. Either way, the utility makes no profit on this part of the bill. Customers who make conservation efforts and energy efficiency investments will continue to see cost savings on this part of their bill. •



The Ohio Statehouse

Key issues update

PUCO adopts rules to implement Ohio’s energy law

This fall, the PUCO adopted rules implementing Ohio’s energy law. The rules adopted by the PUCO outline the requirements for Ohio’s electric distribution utilities to submit electric security plans and market rate options. The rules also describe reasonable economic development and energy efficiency arrangements and incorporate requirements for electric line extensions and minimum service and safety standards.

The PUCO filed the rules with the Joint Committee on Agency Rule Review, and the rules will be effective on the earliest day permitted by law. Copies of the rules adopted by the Commission can be accessed at www.PUCO.ohio.gov/PUCO/rules.

Ohio American Water rates increase

The PUCO approved an agreement last month that allows Ohio American Water to increase its rates for water and wastewater service. The agreement, reached by the company, the Ohio Consumers’ Counsel, PUCO staff, and others, also sets forth consumer benefits including a phase-in approach for any future rate increase requests.

Telephone disconnect rule revised

The PUCO recently revised and adopted a rule that allows incumbent local telephone companies (ILECs) to disconnect customers who fail to pay the full amount of their telephone bill or any past due charges. The new rule allows customers to have basic local telephone service reconnected by paying an amount to cover the ILEC’s rate for basic local telephone service, including associated taxes and government mandated charges, and any applicable deposit and reconnection charge. The customer must also enter into a payment plan with the company to pay off the past due amount owed.

Customers that receive a disconnection notice from their incumbent local telephone company for nonpayment of services should contact their service provider upon receiving the notice to inquire about available payment plans. Customers may also contact the PUCO Consumer Call Center at (800) 686-PUCO or visit the PUCO Web site at www.PUCO.ohio.gov for assistance. •



PUCO IN FOCUS

A spotlight on the latest news affecting Ohio utility consumers.

Preparing for winter storms

While the electric distribution system in Ohio is typically reliable, service interruptions can result from weather conditions such as thunderstorms, high winds or snow storms. The September wind storm that left nearly 2 million Ohioans temporarily without power was the most significant electric outage ever to affect our state.

The PUCO has some suggestions and answers to frequently asked questions should future weather events cause an extended service interruption.

What should I do during a power outage?

All outages should be immediately reported to your electric company. Since many other customers may be calling at the same time, you may not be able to speak with a live person. You can still report your outage by following the automated instructions. This will let the utility company know the location and extent of the outage. You should also unplug all major appliances and electronics, such as computers and televisions, to protect them from a possible power surge when the power comes back on. By leaving one light on, you will be able to tell when your service is restored.

Every home should have a storm kit that includes the following:

- Portable, battery-powered radio
- Flashlights
- Extra batteries
- Manual can opener and bottle opener
- A supply of non-perishable foods
- Water - plan for at least two quarts per person per day
- Personal hygiene products and first aid supplies
- Ice chest and ice or frozen ice packs
- Camp stove, canned heat stove or charcoal grill
- Candles and matches or a lighter
- Cell phone

You will also want to know how to manually open and close any electric garage doors, security doors or gates. Have surge protectors on valuable electrical equipment, such as computers and televisions. Be aware that during an outage, gas appliances with electronic ignitions will not work because electricity is needed to ignite the natural gas. Appliances requiring fans or other electric devices to run (such as central heating units and gas clothes dryers) will not operate.

What can the PUCO do during a power outage?

In certain instances, the PUCO will monitor the situation and may assist in the coordination of services that enable the power company to restore power more quickly. If the outage is severe enough, the PUCO will receive information and updates concerning the outage, but the PUCO cannot restore your service. Your electric company is the best source for updated information concerning the expected time that your service will be restored.

How does the utility prioritize restoration?

The company will first assess the extent and location of the outage. Restoration of power to critical facilities, including police and fire stations, hospitals and water plants is the primary goal of the company. After service is restored in these areas, the company can then focus on others without power. If a customer has damage at the point where service enters their home, they must hire an electrician to repair damages to the "service entrance" before the utility can restore electricity.

What if a member of my family is on medical or life support during a power outage?

The PUCO requires all electric companies to maintain a list of critical customers. Notify the utility if you or a member of your family qualifies. This list does not guarantee uninterrupted service or immediate restoration in the event of an outage. Those in this situation should plan for contingency measures, such as back-up generators, an alternate power source, or evacuation to another location. •