

Preserving Access to Utility Service

TIP SHEET • February 2022

Olivia Wein, National Consumer Law Center

NATIONAL
CENTER ON
**LAW &
ELDER
RIGHTS**

Utility service is a necessity of life, yet many families and individuals struggle to stay current with their utility service. This tip sheet lists steps that can help households keep the utilities on.

Utility Disconnection Crisis Programs and Protections

- **Is there a serious illness protection?**
 - » If you have a client who is seriously ill (e.g., on chemotherapy) or has a chronic condition (e.g., diabetes or heart disease) or whose health, safety, and well-being are at risk if utility service is disconnected, check with the utility to see if there is a serious illness protection rule that can keep the utility service connected at least long enough to secure additional funds to address the utility debt. You will likely need a note from a medical professional. NCLC's report [Protecting Seriously Ill Consumers from Utility Disconnections: What States Can Do to Save Lives Now](#) (Feb. 2021) summarizes state serious illness protections.
- **Is the disconnection risk during a period of extreme temperatures?**
 - » Many states have either [date-based or temperature-based disconnection protections](#) that prohibit disconnection of energy service (and sometimes water) during the winter or during extreme cold or hot temperatures.

Federal Utility Assistance Programs

- **The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP):** Primarily an energy bill assistance program, but it includes a crisis assistance component that can address disconnections. State LIHEAP programs vary, but many also include heating or cooling system repairs, low-cost weatherization and home-energy counseling. To find your local Low Income Energy Office, call the National Energy Assistance Referral (NEAR) toll-free at 1-866-674-6327 for an energy assistance referral, or email NEAR at energyassistance@ncat.org.
- **The Low Income Weatherization Program (WAP):** Weatherization reduces energy costs for low-income households by increasing the energy efficiency of their homes, while ensuring their health and safety. Examples of possible weatherization program measures include: modifications to reduce drafts around doors and windows; upgrades to energy efficient appliances; servicing heating or cooling equipment; and removal of hazardous conditions. Here is a [tool to find your state or local WAP agency](#).
- **The Low Income Home Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP):** An emergency program established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to help low-income households, particularly those with a high water burden, with their water and wastewater bills. It addresses both reconnections and arrearages. State LIHWAP programs are on the [U.S. Health and Human Resources website](#).

- **The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP):** A benefit program that helps low-income households afford essential broadband service. Eligible households receive a discount on broadband service of up to \$30 per month (and up to \$75 per month for households on qualifying Tribal lands and high cost areas). Eligible households can also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers if they contribute between \$10 and \$50 toward the purchase price. For more information go to the [Federal Communications Commission's ACP webpage](#).
- **Lifeline:** Currently provides eligible households with \$9.25 per month for bundled voice and data or broadband-only service, or \$5.25 per month for voice-only service. Households enrolled in Lifeline do not need to apply for ACP, as they are automatically eligible. Households can have *both* Lifeline and ACP benefits, and can use them in combination. Lifeline and ACP are administered by the Universal Service Administrative Company. Here is a webpage for more information about [Lifeline](#).

Additional State and Local Utility Assistance

Utilities and local organizations may have charitable giving programs to help customers facing disconnections. The LIHEAP Clearinghouse has resources on [utility and charitable programs](#) and runs the [National Energy Assistance Referral](#) service (NEAR).

Finally, once the risk of disconnection is mitigated, consumers should check to see if the utility has special low-income rates, discount programs, or [arrears management programs](#). These are programs that can help lower the bills and provide arrears forgiveness. NCLC works with advocates in the states to implement these utility affordability programs. For more information, please visit the [Telecommunications webpage](#).

Additional Resources

- [NCLER Webinar: Programs to Keep Older Adults Connected to Energy and Utility Services](#)
- [NCLER Tip Sheet: Connecting Older Adults to Emergency Rental Assistance Programs](#)
- [National Consumer Law Center: Energy, Utilities and Telecommunications Resources](#)