



National
Consumer Law
Center



What Pennsylvania Can Do to Improve Energy Affordability: Snapshot

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EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Utility insecurity threatens health, housing stability, food security, family wellbeing, and access to education and employment. While existing programs provide assistance, Pennsylvania's next governor can significantly improve the affordability, reliability, and accessibility of essential electric, gas, water, and wastewater service through targeted program improvement that seeks to overcome currently fragmented enrollment, repeated requests for documentation, low participation, limits on annual assistance, and uneven protections across utility sectors. Pennsylvania also lacks sufficient public data to identify and remedy racial and geographic disparities in disconnections.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Assistance is essential but difficult to access.** Pennsylvania's universal service system includes Customer Assistance Programs (CAP), Low-Income Usage Reduction Programs (LIURP), hardship funds, and Customer Assistance and Referral Evaluation Services (CARES). Per the [PUC's 2024 Universal Service Report](#), an estimated 1.3 million households—about 25% of Pennsylvania households—had income at or below 150% of the federal poverty level, yet participation remained far below estimated need.
- **Eligibility and enrollment are unnecessarily complex.** Customers may face separate utility-specific applications, recurring documentation demands, and inconsistent use of LIHEAP data. The PUC has developed a common application but has not required universal adoption.
- **Program design can undermine affordability.** Electric CAP credit limits can force participants back to full tariff rates after annual assistance is exhausted. Residential customers currently bear nearly all universal service costs, while other rate classes receive broad community and economic benefits.
- **Water protections lag behind energy protections.** Large electric and gas utilities must maintain universal service programs, but comparable statutory and regulatory standards do not generally apply to water and wastewater utilities.
- **Retail energy markets have imposed substantial costs.** Since 2015, residential electric shopping customers have paid approximately \$2.67 billion more than applicable default service rates across the utilities analyzed in the brief. Common problems include teaser rates, uncapped variable pricing, automatic renewal, cancellation fees, and weak remedies.

PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION

- 1. Modernize assistance enrollment.** Require electric and gas utilities to use one common application and share information with customer consent. Use LIHEAP data for automatic CAP enrollment and recertification, reduce repeated documentation, extend recertification periods, and support electronic enrollment and renewal.
- 2. Improve CAP outcomes and funding equity.** Eliminate electric CAP credit maximums or automatically increase them with rate changes. Direct utilities to propose recovery of universal service costs across customer classes rather than imposing them almost entirely on residential customers.
- 3. Reform Chapter 56 billing and collection rules consistent with the recommendations of the [low income advocates](#) and [Governor Shapiro](#).** Establish longer and more affordable payment arrangements, including renewed arrangements after hardship or changed circumstances. Expand medical certificates from 30 days to at least 90 days and to 180 days for chronic illness; broaden eligible medical certifiers; and require affirmative outreach to medically vulnerable customers.
- 4. Preventing dangerous disconnections.** Strengthen winter and summer protections and adopt a summer moratorium from June 1 through August 31 for households at or below 300% of the federal poverty level. Eliminate security deposits and reconnection fees, improve multilingual notice, increase advance notice and contact requirements, and prohibit shutoffs on holidays and the preceding business day.
- 5. Extend protections across essential services.** Apply consistent affordability, universal service, billing, and collection requirements to large jurisdictional water and wastewater utilities. Strengthen protections for survivors of domestic violence by allowing qualified counselors or advocates to verify eligibility.
- 6. Measure and address inequity.** Require utilities to report terminations by ZIP code or census tract, amount owed, length of delinquency, and assistance received. Compare outcomes with Census data while controlling for income and publish an annual utility shutoff equity report.
- 7. Reform residential retail energy markets.** Pursue legislative repeal or substantial reform of residential retail choice. Pending legislation, require affirmative consent for contract renewal, return customers to default service when consent is absent, prohibit variable-rate contracts, require fixed prices for at least 12 months, eliminate purchase-of-receivables programs, and restore authority to order refunds.

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The Pennsylvania Utility Law Project (PULP) is a statewide specialty legal services program that provides information, assistance, and advice about utility and energy matters affecting low income Pennsylvanians.

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