A woman with blonde hair and glasses is looking at a smartphone. A man with brown hair is sitting next to her, looking distressed with his hand on his head. They are in a room with a laptop and papers on a table.

How To Apply for Utility Assistance

A Guide for Cuyahoga
and Summit Counties by
the Northeast Ohio
Solutions Journalism
Collaborative

2022 Edition

INTRODUCTION

Dealing with a mounting utility bill or shut-off notice can be scary, especially during the winter months, and especially during a deadly pandemic that has caused many to need to shelter at home. There are programs out there to help, but navigating them can be frustrating because of the amount of paperwork you need to provide. Plus, many agencies where you can sign up are closed to the public, and most applications must be completed entirely remotely.

First, to help make the process less daunting, we've compiled some tips from local advocates and people who have gone through these programs. Then we'll look at specific programs and what they require.

IMPORTANT TIPS AND THINGS TO REMEMBER:

Save copies of your utility bills or disconnection notices. Plus, save any proof that you have applied for these bill assistance programs. The main reason is some programs ask for proof that you have applied for HEAP (Home Energy Assistance Program) and PIPP (Percentage of Income Payment Plan) first. These are the two main federal energy assistance programs that are available in Ohio.

Get your documents ready before you apply. We'll share a list below of common documents required. Often, a cellphone photo of these documents is good enough if you are submitting them online.

Check back often. When applying for the HEAP and PIPP programs at local energy assistance providers like Step Forward or CHN Housing Partners in Cleveland, often the limited slots for these appointments (which are virtual or over the phone) will be taken quickly each day. New slots are released at the beginning of each day and sometimes hourly, so it's best to check in the morning, and at the top of the hour throughout the day.

Check with local agencies. Often energy companies will have their own assistance programs that are run either through local energy assistance providers like Step Forward or CHN, or through the Salvation Army, so it's worth exploring what those agencies have to offer first.

If you have zero income, you will need to provide an IRS tax transcript to confirm your status to some agencies. If you filed a tax return, or even if you did not, you can go to <https://www.irs.gov/individuals/get-transcript> to get your transcript.

One of the best pieces of advice we can give you is to call United Way's 211 helpline (some counties, like Cuyahoga and Summit, have their own). Trained 211 navigators can help you find aid programs you might be eligible for, and even help you apply.

If you have trouble getting utility assistance during the pandemic or tips that might help others, let us know. Take our survey [here](#).

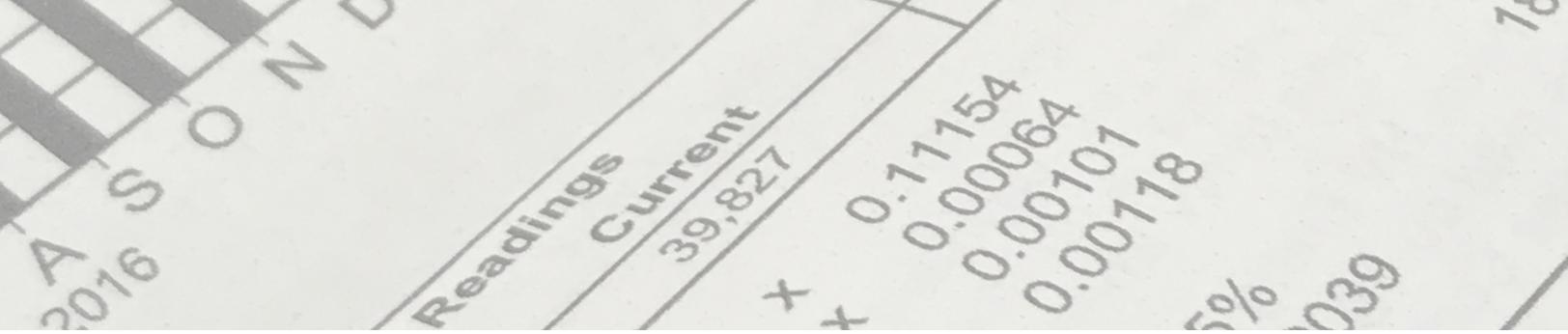
ANNUAL INCOME GUIDELINES

For families of 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5

	150%	175%	200%	250%
Individual	\$20,385	\$23,783	\$27,180	\$33,975
Family of 2	\$27,465	\$32,043	\$36,620	\$45,775
Family of 3	\$34,545	\$40,303	\$46,060	\$57,575
Family of 4	\$41,625	\$48,563	\$55,500	\$69,375
Family of 5	\$48,705	\$56,823	\$64,940	\$81,175

This is a project of the Northeast Ohio Solutions Journalism Collaborative.





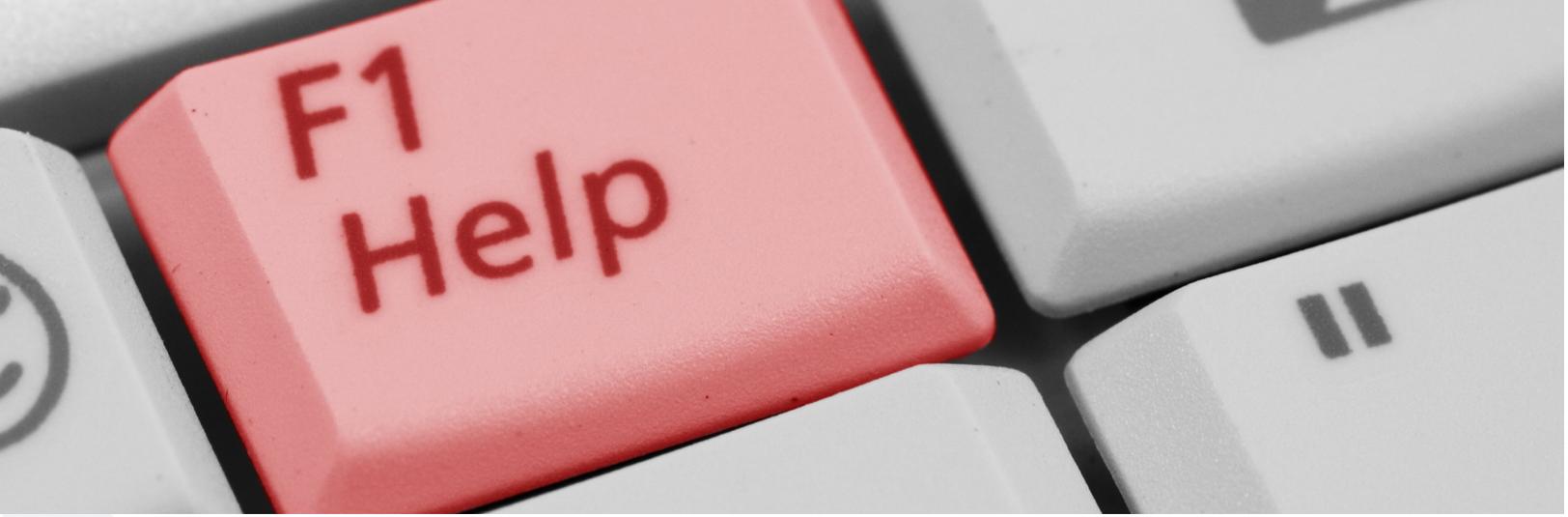
LIST OF COMMON DOCUMENTS **REQUIRED:**

- Copies of past-due utility bills: water, sewer, electric and gas.
- Photo ID
- Social Security cards for all household members. Can include printouts from Social Security with the full number on them, Medicare cards and Ohio Works First SNAP printouts.
- Proof of one month of income for everybody 18 or older in a household. Keep in mind you need each paystub you've received for the whole month.
- Proof of citizenship or legal residency: often social security cards, birth certificates or passports for all household members. Only U.S. citizens, U.S. nationals or immigrants with a qualified alien (immigrant) status are eligible for most of these programs. Some agencies will only accept birth certificates (or newborn birth letters). You can obtain copies of birth certificates by calling the Cleveland Department of Health's Bureau of Vital Statistics at (866) 691-1914.
- Proof that you have applied for programs like HEAP and PIPP.
- Proof of your disability (if relevant to your financial situation). This can be a note from your doctor or counselor.



SHORT-TERM COVID-RELATED AID*

* PLEASE NOTE THAT THESE PROGRAMS ONLY LAST AS LONG AS MONEY IS AVAILABLE THROUGH FEDERAL EMERGENCY RELIEF FUNDS. AS OF NOW, IT LOOKS LIKE MOST OF THESE FUNDS MUST BE SPENT BY THE END OF 2022.



CUYAHOGA COUNTY EMERGENCY COVID ASSISTANCE-STEP FORWARD

Assistance is available for people in Cuyahoga County with overdue utility bills, mortgage payments, rent and potentially other bills as well.

- Must have a COVID-19-related hardship like a lost job, reduced hours or needing to be home caring for children. No documentation of this hardship is needed. You can sign a statement confirming you are in need.
- Applicants must be at or below 200% of the federal poverty line. That's \$52,400 for a family of four.
- Documents needed:
 - Photo ID
 - Social Security cards for all household members (or proof of citizenship or legal residency; can be a passport or birth certificate)
 - Proof of one month of income for everybody 18 and older in the household
 - Past due utility bills

You can apply by going to Step Forward's website. If you have trouble applying online, call (216) 370-3480.

SUMMIT COUNTY EMERGENCY COVID ASSISTANCE-AKRON CARES

Assistance is available for people in Summit County with overdue utility bills and rent.

- Applicants must be Summit County residents; must be renters; and must live at or below 80% of the area median income (\$64,100 for a family of four).
- Must have a COVID-19-related hardship, like a lost job, reduced hours, being home caring for children. Documentation of that hardship is not required.
- Applicants should gather their household, income, landlord and utility information including account numbers prior to starting the application.

You can **apply** by going to www.summitcountycares.org or calling 2-1-1 in Summit County.



NEW TEMPORARY WATER BILL ASSISTANCE: LIHWAP

The Low Income Water Assistance Program is a temporary federal program offered by CHN Housing Partners in Cuyahoga County (and other Energy Assistance Providers in Ohio) that provides relief to people behind on water and sewer bills. This program only lasts through Sept. 30, 2022.

Who is eligible? Ohioans at or below 175% of the federal poverty guideline who pay for their water and sewer bills (for a family of four, that's \$46,375 per year).

What paperwork is needed?

- Copies of your most recent water and sewer bills
- Photo ID
- Social Security cards for each household member
- Proof of U.S Citizenship or legal residency for each household member
- Income verification for the past 30 days or 12 months for each household member over age 18
- If you're a renter, a copy of your lease that shows you are responsible for water/sewer.

How to apply? Cuyahoga County residents can call (216) 350-8008 to make an appointment, or schedule online at www.chn.itfrontdesk.com.



STATE UTILITY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Local agencies in each county help customers sign up for these programs listed below, and make sure they qualify. You can find the agency listed for each county by going to the Ohio Department of Development's website. Keep in mind that most agencies will be requiring you to apply online or over the phone.

In Cuyahoga County

- CHN Housing Partners, (216) 350-8008
- Step Forward, (216) 696-9077.

In Summit County

- Akron/Summit Community Action, Inc., (330) 376-7730.

You can also mail in your application—which you can find online—along with required documents for HEAP or PIPP to:

Energy Assistance Programs

P.O. Box 1240

Columbus, Ohio 43216

The main drop box location for documents for CHN Housing Partners is 2999 Payne Ave, Cleveland, OH 44114, or fax to (216) 912-0700 (Cuyahoga County Public Library offers free fax services). For Step Forward, the drop box is 2203 Superior Ave, Cleveland, OH 44114, or you can email documents to heapdocuments@stepforwardtoday.org. Please do not include originals of documents, only photocopies or printouts.



PERCENTAGE OF INCOME PAYMENT PLAN (PIPP):

How does PIPP work? Customers who qualify for PIPP pay 5% of their monthly income for gas and 5% for electricity. If a home is heated by electricity, the customer pays 10% of their monthly income for electricity, a minimum of \$10.

Customers who make PIPP payments on time every month for 24 months can have their total balance eliminated.

You can be dropped from the PIPP program if you:

- Don't report a change in income - like making more money.
- Forget to verify your income at least once a year.
- Miss payments and don't catch up by your "anniversary date" when you originally signed up.

Who is eligible? Ohioans who rent or own their homes and who make less than 150% of federal poverty guidelines, which for a family of four would be \$3,275 a month or less. Customers must receive their gas or electricity from private utilities - like the Illuminating Company or Dominion - not public utilities like Cleveland Public Power.

What paperwork do you need? Proof of income for the last 30 days for people who live in the home, except for minors.

How to apply: Customers can apply by mail, online at energyhelp.ohio.gov or with a local Energy Assistance Provider (listed above).

Customers will have to fill out the application, which is available in English or Spanish, and provide:

- Your most recent gas and/or electric bills.
- List of people who live in the home and their birth dates and Social Security numbers.
- Proof of income, like paycheck stubs, for anyone in the house who is over 18 and working.
- Proof of citizenship or legal residency for all household members. Accepted documents include a birth certificate, social security card, voter registration card or passport.

If you are dropped from the program, you will get billed for the full balance of what you would have owed on your utility bill.



HOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (HEAP):

What is HEAP? A federal program run by the state that helps with a once-yearly benefit to help pay off an electric or gas bill. This program also is only available for private gas or electric customers, although Cleveland Public Power does accept HEAP payments.

Who is eligible?: Ohioans in households living at or below 175% federal poverty guidelines, or \$45,850 for a family of four.

How to apply: Call or go online with your local Energy Assistance Provider. In Cuyahoga County, that's Step Forward or CHN Housing Partners. You can also apply online at energyhelp.ohio.gov, or by mail.

What paperwork do you need? The same documentation as PIPP.

HEAP WINTER/SUMMER CRISIS PROGRAMS:

What are these programs? They are branches of the HEAP program that are available once per winter (Nov. 1-March 31) and summer (July 1-Sept. 30) seasons.

Who is eligible? Ohioans in households living at or below 175% of the federal poverty guidelines.

The Summer Crisis program additionally requires you to have a household member who is either:

- 60 years of age and older
- Has been diagnosed with COVID-19, or can provide physician documentation that cooling assistance is needed for a household member's health.
- Households who have a disconnect notice, have been shut off or are trying to establish new electric service

Meanwhile, the Winter Crisis program additionally requires you to have been disconnected from your utility, or have less than a 25% supply of bulk fuel in your tank.

How to apply: Contact your local Energy Assistance Provider. In Cuyahoga County, that's Step Forward or CHN Housing Partners.

What paperwork do you need? Same as above with HEAP.



PRC (PREVENTION, RETENTION AND CONTINGENCY):

What is PRC? Parents, caregivers and expectant mothers can apply once a year for short-term emergency needs, including utility bills. Must first apply for other help available in the community. COVID-19-related relief is only for rent and utilities. The payment is capped at \$750. Find more information for Cuyahoga County here.

Who is eligible? Applicants must earn 200% or less of the federal poverty guideline, which is \$52,400 for a family of four. The applicant must not have more than \$1,000 in the bank or available. The bill must be in the applicant's name and a shut-off notice must be provided. See below for what each company provides. The following meet the "shut off notice" requirement:

- Columbia Gas: A termination notice.
- Dominion/East Ohio Gas: Letter stating they have a shut-off notice or final bill.
- Illuminating Co. First Energy: Disconnection notice statement
- Cleveland Public Power: Bill with a past-due balance.
- Cleveland Water: Final notice or statement showing the bill is in shut off or delinquent status.

What paperwork do you need? Same as above.

How to apply: Download the application online, fill it out and email it-along with the required documents-to Cuy-PRC-Application@jfs.ohio.gov. You can also call (216) 987-7392 to leave a message requesting a PRC application be mailed to you. You can drop the completed application off at a Neighborhood Family Service Center in Cuyahoga County. For example, you can drop it off at Cuyahoga County's Workforce Opportunity Resource Center in Cleveland, at the Virgil E. Brown Building at 1641 Payne Avenue, Suite 120A.

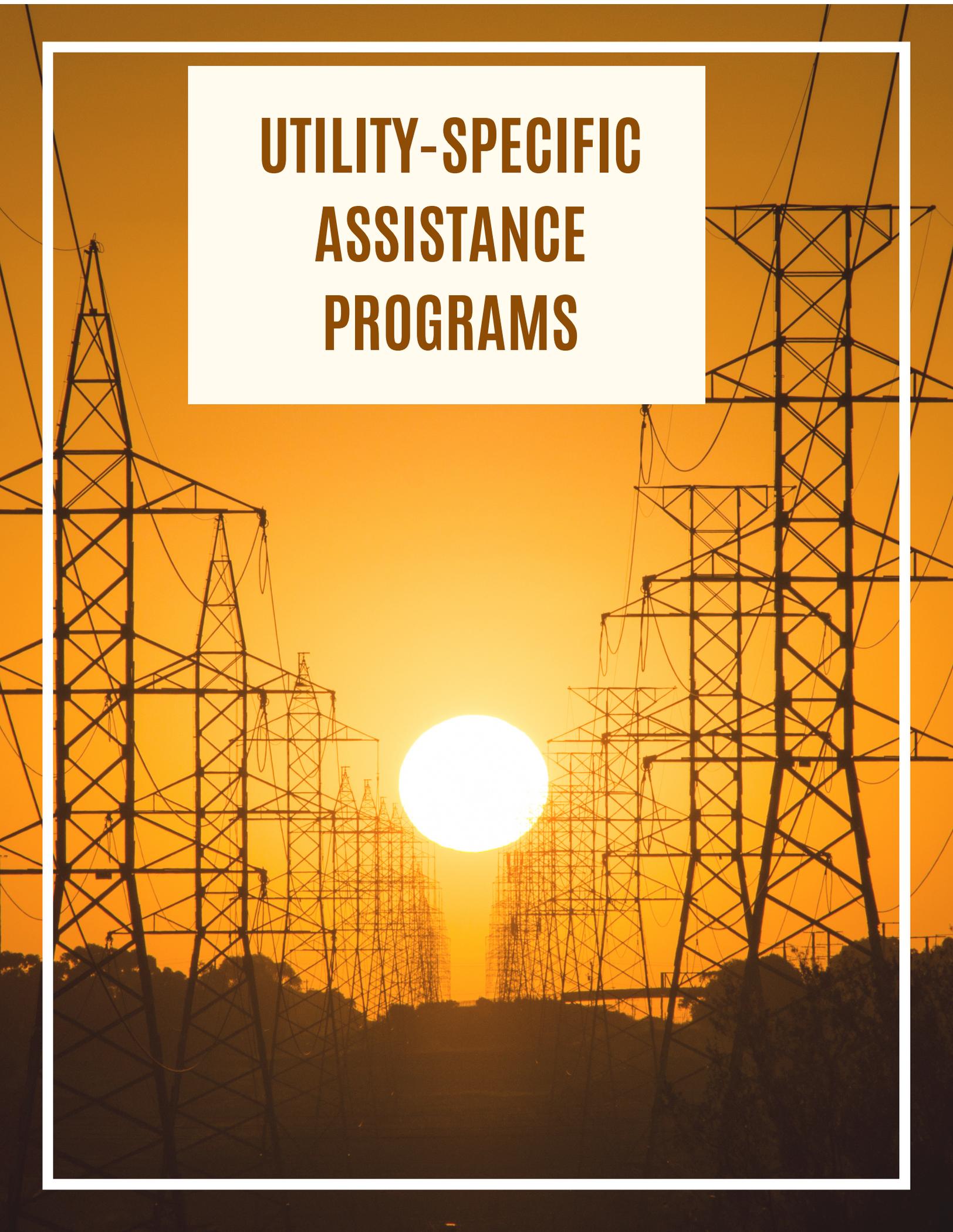


MEDICAL CERTIFICATES*



Customers of private utilities facing a disconnection may be eligible for a 30-day delay if a medical professional certifies that the disconnection would be a danger to the health of the customer or that they or a member of their household rely on life-supporting equipment, like oxygen.

- The medical professional must examine the customer and has to fully complete the medical certificate form.
- The option can only be used three times in a 12-month period.



UTILITY-SPECIFIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

AEP OHIO NEIGHBOR TO NEIGHBOR BILL PAY ASSISTANCE:

Provides AEP Ohio customers up to a \$350 grant that is applied directly to their past-due electric bill. The grant helps limited-income customers maintain or restore their electricity.

- This program is available to AEP Ohio customers at or below 300% of the federal poverty guidelines. For example, a family of four earning up to \$79,500 per year is eligible.
- Applicants must be more than 30 days behind on their bill payment
- Income-eligible clients must apply for Heating HEAP, Cooling HEAP, Winter CRISIS, Summer CRISIS and PIPP when those programs are open (see programs listed above).
- Applicants must have a minimum balance of \$50 on their bill.

Applicants may apply for the grant once per program year, during the heating or cooling season (heating season is from October 18, 2021, through April 30, 2022, and cooling season is July 1, 2022, through August 31, 2022.)

- **There are two options to apply:**
 - Complete the online application, found here:
<https://www.hardshiptools.org/MyApp/>
 - Submit through your local community action agency, which may offer in-person services, found here:
<https://www.hardshiptools.org/AgencyFinder.aspx>



Cleveland Public Power

Cleveland utilities are not regulated by the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio, but the city follows the same “winter rules” for electric service. Cleveland does not participate in the PIPP program.

- Customers can use a payment from the HEAP program, if they qualify, as a down payment to reconnect or maintain service.
- To learn more about payment plans, call (216) 664-2782.



FirstEnergy/ Illuminating Company

Customers are eligible for emergency hardship funds, up to a maximum grant of \$300 to customers who have had a disconnection notice or their service disconnected.

- Customer must have a gross household income at or below 200% of the federal poverty guideline (which is \$52,400 for a family of four). Home must be individually metered, and the active account must be in the name of an adult resident in the household.
- Must first apply for the HEAP program when open and if the customer is eligible for that program.
- Must have made a “good faith payment” in the last 90 days.
- **Documentation needed:**
 - Copy of most recent electric bill
 - List of all household members’ birth dates and Social Security numbers
 - Proof of income for at least the last 30 days
 - Proof of all First Energy payments made in the last 90 days
 - Proof of application to HEAP program
- **Apply by** contacting your local Energy Assistance Provider. In Cuyahoga County, that’s Step Forward or CHN Housing Partners.

FirstEnergy also offers some assistance to customers through donor and corporate funds, although that money can run out each season. Call the Salvation Army in Cuyahoga County at (216) 861-8185, or in Summit County at (330) 762-8481, to see if any assistance is left.

FirstEnergy does offer several additional benefits for people with family members who are active-duty military, or who use electrically operated life-sustaining equipment in their home. Call 1-800-589-3101 for more details.

DOMINION ENERGY'S ENERGYSHARE PROGRAM:

Dominion's EnergyShare is described by the company as a "last resort" program administered by the Salvation Army for Dominion customers who have exhausted all other forms of aid, like HEAP.

- Customers not eligible for the PIPP program may apply for EnergyShare assistance until May 31, 2022, or until funds run out, to receive a maximum payment of \$500 toward their bill. PIPP-eligible customers may apply for EnergyShare between December 1, 2021, and May 31, 2022, for a max payment of \$300.
- Yearly gross household income must be at or below 300% of the federal poverty guidelines for eligibility (\$78,600 for four people); or the head of household is unemployed, or the applicant is experiencing "financial hardship."

Customers may contact the Salvation Army for more information or see if they qualify at: <https://easternusa.salvationarmy.org/>.





COLUMBIA GAS OF OHIO'S HEATSHARE PROGRAM:

Like the EnergyShare program, Columbia Gas of Ohio's HeatShare program is described by the company as a "last resort" program that provides a one-time \$250 grant per calendar year. It is administered by the Salvation Army for Columbia Gas customers who have exhausted all other forms of aid, like HEAP.

- Families qualify if they have an annual gross household income at or below 175% of the federal poverty guidelines (or \$46,375 for a family of four).
- Households experiencing financial hardships may also be eligible for the program, determined on a "case-by-case basis," according to Columbia Gas.

Apply by contacting your local Salvation Army,
<https://easternusa.salvationarmy.org/>.

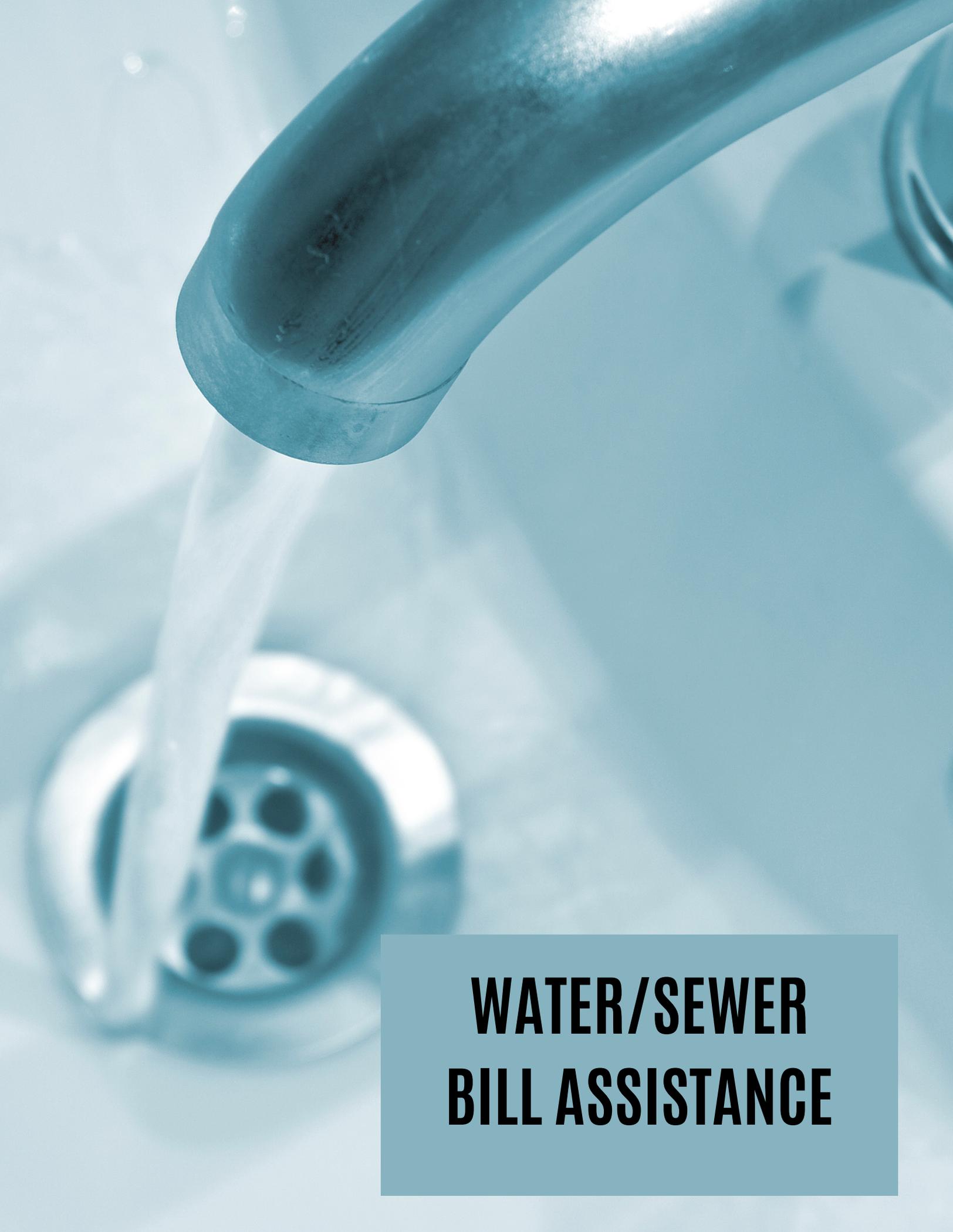


Winter Payment and Reconnection Plans

Ohio requires these plans to be offered to all residential gas and electric customers (not including Cleveland Public Power) from October to April 15, regardless of income. Cleveland Public Power voluntarily participates in what utilities refer to as the "winter rules." Contact your individual utility company to learn more about the individual plans.

- The Winter Heating Season Plan requires a customer to pay a third of their total bill balance each month.
- The "one-sixth" plan requires a customer to pay their past-due bill amount in six equal monthly payments in addition to each new bill amount.
- The "one-ninth" plan requires a customer to pay their past due bill amount in nine equal monthly payments in addition to a monthly budget amount, based on estimated use.





**WATER/SEWER
BILL ASSISTANCE**

WATER/SEWER AFFORDABILITY PROGRAM

CHN Housing Partners administers a water/sewer affordability program for the city of Cleveland's Division of Water and the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District. The program provides a 40% discount to homeowners on both their water and sewer bills.

Who is eligible? You must be at or below 200% of the federal poverty line (about \$52,400 for a family of four). You must be a homeowner for the water affordability program. For the sewer affordability program, you can be a renter.

How to apply? Call CHN Housing Partners at (216) 774-2349 or go to <https://chnhousingpartners.org/utilityassistance/>

What paperwork is needed?

- Photo ID
- Verification for those household members (Social Security card preferred, or birth certificate)
- Documents to verify all income received in the last 60 days—paystubs, benefit statements, etc.
- Copies of utility bills.
- Documentation of a hardship, like a job loss, medical expenses, or something else. This must have occurred within the past six months.
- Each year, you also must re-verify your income in order to be eligible for a new year.



SEWER CRISIS

CHN also administers the sewer crisis program through the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District. It provides a one-time payment to people who have experienced a "hardship" within the last six months.

- Customers of the sewer district can apply if they have documentation to prove the hardship. To apply, call CHN Housing Partners at (216) 774-2349 or go to <https://chnhousingpartners.org/utilityassistance/>.



HOMESTEAD WATER/SEWER PROGRAM

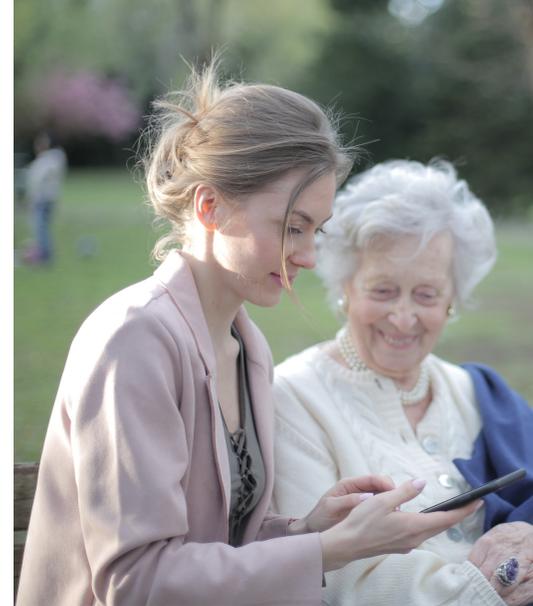
The Cleveland Water Department and the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District offer a program that provides a lower fixed charge and consumption rate for their customers, run through the city's Public Utilities Department.

How to apply? Go to <https://www.clevelandwater.com/customer-service/water-rates/discount-programs> download the application. Fill it out and send it to: Division of Water, Homestead Unit, P.O. Box 94687, Cleveland, Ohio 44101-4687.

Who is eligible?

- You must be 65 years or older, or "totally and permanently disabled," according to the city's definition. That means you have some "impairment in body or mind" that makes you unable to work, for a period of at least 12 months or "indefinitely."
- You must own and live at the home where the water or sewer bill is being sent.
- You must earn less than \$34,500 per-year.
- You must re-enroll every three years.

what paperwork is needed? If you have a disability, you must have your physician sign the application affirming that fact. Otherwise, no additional documents are required.



Where else can I look for help?

As always, we recommend calling 211 as a starting place. Trained navigators will help you find the help you need, whether it's utility bills or help finding housing or food. Some local service providers are:

- Salvation Army of Greater Cleveland: (216) 861-8185
- Legal Aid Society of Cleveland: 216-687-1900 (216-586-3190 for Spanish)
- Northeast Ohio Coalition to End Homelessness (call to reach an outreach worker if you are homeless): (216) 432-0540
- Catholic Charities: (800) 860-7373
- Lakewood Community Services Center: (216) 226-6466
- Greater Cleveland Food Bank Help Center: (216) 738-2067
- Community Housing Solutions: (216) 231-5815
- Cuyahoga County Job and Family Services: (844) 640-6646
- EDEN: (216) 961-9690
- May Dugan Center: (216) 631-5800
- Journey Center for Safety and Healing (for survivors of domestic or sexual violence): (216) 229-2420



This guide was created by Report for America Corps member Conor Morris and Cleveland freelance journalist Rachel Dissell. The Land reporter Michael Indriolo, IdeaStream reporter Taylor Haggerty, The Devil Strip reporter Abbey Marshall and WKYC Reporters Rachel Polansky and Phil Trexler contributed reporting to this guide as well.

This guide is a project of the Northeast Ohio Solutions Journalism Collaborative. NEO SoJo is a team of Northeast Ohio news outlets in our second year of finding solutions to long standing social problems in the region. Our project this year, called "Making Ends Meet," is focused on how residents in our communities can find life-sustaining jobs, affordable housing, afford their utilities and access transit to work and play.

The local news landscape has shrunk for more than ten years. Between 2004 and 2017, Ohio lost more than half of its newspaper jobs, a trend observed nationwide. Our hope is that by working together, we can reverse that loss in the flow of important information to people who need it most. For more information, go to neosojo.com.