

Office of People's Counsel  
[www.opc.maryland.gov](http://www.opc.maryland.gov)  
[DLInfo OPC@maryland.gov](mailto:DLInfo_OPC@maryland.gov)  
410-767-8150; 800-207-4055

## **COVID-19 and State of Emergency How to Help your Clients with Gas and Electric Bills**

Governor Hogan declared a State of Emergency for Maryland on March 5, 2020. On March 16, he announced an Executive Order prohibiting the termination of electric, gas, water and sewage services, as well as phone, cable, and internet services. The Order also prohibits the collection of late fees during this time.

The length of time for the suspension of late fees and terminations varies depending on the utility serving your clients. Refer to our "[What Customers Should Know](#)" alerts on our website at [www.opc.maryland.gov](http://www.opc.maryland.gov) for more information on specific provider dates or call the service provider directly to learn more about the termination and late fee suspension dates. Also check out OPC's "Resource Guides" on our website.

### **[Should your clients still pay their utility bills during the suspension of terminations and late fees?](#)**

Yes! They should make every effort to stay current on all utility payments. Once the suspension is lifted, they will be responsible for all utility usage and payments. It is important for them to make payment on their monthly bill and any past-due balances – even if they are partial payments. They will still receive their utility bills each month. If they are struggling to pay their bills, they should reach out to their utility company to come up with a payment plan. They can still apply for state energy assistance programs. Local DSS offices are closed to the public, and some other state or local agencies have altered their service delivery procedures. See below for more instructions specific to OHEP and the Fuel Fund. Keep in mind that many smaller agencies like churches and non-profits may close their doors completely during this time, and may have additional requests for other assistance due to lay-offs or restricted work hours.

### **[What if someone in the household is critically ill or relies on electricity service for life support.](#)**

If someone in the home is critically ill and relies on electricity service for life support ask if they are receiving any ongoing services at a medical facility or a hospital. If they are, find out if there is a Critical Medical Needs Navigator on staff at that medical facility or hospital. If there is a Navigator connect your client with this person in order to receive help for their utility payment. If they are not connected to a Navigator, contact the Office of People's Counsel to learn about how you can best connect your client to resources in their critical situation.

### **[Available Energy Assistance Programs](#)**

[Apply to the Office of Home Energy Programs \(OHEP\)](#)

Limited-income customers may be eligible for Maryland state energy assistance programs that can help with utility bills. There is one application for all Maryland state energy assistance programs through OHEP.

*Who is eligible?*

Any Maryland resident who meets income guidelines is eligible to apply for energy assistance through OHEP.

<b>FY 2020 OHEP ELIGIBILITY GUIDELINES for MEAP and EUSP</b>		
<b>Household Size</b>	<b>Maximum Monthly Income</b>	<b>Maximum Yearly Income</b>
1	\$1,821	\$21,858
2	\$2,400	\$29,593
3	\$3,030	\$37,328
4	\$4,290	\$45,063
5	\$4,920	\$52,798
6	\$5,550	\$60,533
7	\$5,689	\$68,268
8	\$6,334	\$76,003
For each Additional person, add	\$645	\$7,740

*How does a person apply?*

As the state responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, OHEP will continue to accept applications and process benefit payments. As of March 18, all State local DSS offices are closed, and some local Community Action Agencies (CAAs) may close. In order to limit person-to-person contact, there are several ways that a person can apply:

- **Online:** At this time, this is the most reliable option. Apply online at [www.mydhrbenefits.dhr.state.md.us](http://www.mydhrbenefits.dhr.state.md.us)
- **Phone:** A person may call their local OHEP office to request assistance completing an application over the phone. The list of local offices is here: <http://dhs.maryland.gov/office-of-home-energy-programs/>
- **Mail-in or Drop-off:** If they do not have access to the internet they can call 800-332-6347 Mon-Fri, 8AM-4:30PM to request an application be mailed to them. They may continue to mail applications to their local office for processing and all OHEP offices will have a secure lockbox to drop-off applications.

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They will need to provide copies of certain documents. See the list at <http://dhs.maryland.gov/office-of-home-energy-programs/>.

Processing times and payment disbursement times should not be affected by these temporary changes. To check the status of the person's application you can go online to [www.myohepstatus.org](http://www.myohepstatus.org).

[Apply to Fuel Fund](#)

The Fuel Fund is a charitable organization that provides financial assistance for utility bills and bulk fuel to those who are eligible.

*Who is eligible?*

The eligibility guidelines for Fuel Fund has changed during the State of Emergency in order to be responsive to the needs of the community. These policies may continue to change.

In order to be eligible, clients must meet the following criteria:

1. Maryland resident.
2. Completed current year (FY20) OHEP application. There are exceptions being made in response to the pandemic:
  - a. If your client is a senior (60+), but has not yet completed the OHEP application for FY20, contact the Fuel Fund and they may still be able to help.
  - b. If the client cannot apply to OHEP (cannot get documents in time, cannot drop-off, doesn't have internet access etc.), but they have a FY19 OHEP application on file, the Fuel Fund will use the FY19 data and will still assist.
3. Meet Fuel Fund's income requirements. The Fuel Fund program is flexible. For special circumstances involving extreme hardship, your client may be eligible even if their income is slightly over the limit.
4. Typically the Fuel Fund focuses on helping those who have a turn-off notice or who are already off. In response to the pandemic, if the client has a completed an OHEP application for FY20 and has received funds from OHEP this year, Fuel Fund will help without a turn-off notice.
5. The client has not received help from the Fuel Fund in the past 12 months.

\*Because of the temporary hold on utility terminations, 7 day holds may not necessary at this time. Make sure that the client's local utility moratorium on shut-offs is still in effect.

Household Size	Maximum Monthly Income	Maximum Annual Income
1	\$2,082	\$24,980
2	\$2,818	\$33,820
3	\$3,555	\$42,660
4	\$4,292	\$51,500
5	\$5,028	\$60,340
6	\$5,765	\$69,180
7	\$6,502	\$78,020
8	\$7,238	\$86,860

*How does a person apply?*

There are two ways to apply:

- **Online:** Apply online at [www.fuelfundmaryland.org](http://www.fuelfundmaryland.org). If the person is already a client of the Fuel Fund, they can email any questions or payment information to [payments@fuelfundmaryland.org](mailto:payments@fuelfundmaryland.org).
- **Phone:** If the person cannot apply online then they can call 410-235-9080 option 1 Mon/Wed/Fri, 10AM-12PM. Current Fuel Fund clients can call to report payments anytime by selecting option 2.

Processing times and disbursement times should not be affected by these temporary changes.

[Dial 2-1-1 for other resources](#)

2-1-1 is a number you can dial and speak to someone about other resources in your local community that may be able to help utility bills. 2-1-1 is available 7 days per week, 24 hours per day. You can speak with someone at 2-1-1 about other issues like not having enough food, COVID-19 questions, or help with other bills. Right now there are extended wait times as 2-1-1 is the number to call for COVID-19 questions. If you need to locate other resources for your client, but do not have time to call, you can search the 2-1-1 database online at [www.211md.org](http://www.211md.org).

**\*\*If your client has past due water bills reach out to their provider to make a payment plan. In accordance with the Executive Order water companies must suspend all terminations and late fees at this time. Some water companies are restoring previously terminated households in light of this emergency situation. Contact the provider directly to discuss the specifics of your client's case.**

**\*\*If your client's employment was affected by the emergency closures they may be eligible for Unemployment Benefits. To learn more about possible Unemployment Benefits visit [www.dllr.state.md.us](http://www.dllr.state.md.us) or call 800-827-4839.**