

Office of People's Counsel
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 expired on September 1, 2020. The Public Service Commission made a ruling extending the moratorium until October 1, 2020 to prevent shut-offs and late fee collection for non-payment of electric, gas and private water. Any termination notice sent before October 1, 2020 is invalid.

The utility companies may not send a termination notice until October 1, 2020. The stated turn-off date cannot be before November 15, 2020.

[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. All utilities must offer a 24-month payment plan to OHEP certified customers and a 12-month payment plan to non-certified customers. They cannot deny a customer a payment plan for previous broken payment arrangements in the last 18 months. There are no required security deposits or down payments necessary to enter into a payment plan.

They can still apply for state energy assistance programs. Local DSS offices are starting to open and schedule appointments to see clients. Call the local OHEP office to see if they have any walk-in hours or can schedule an appointment. 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.

FY 2020 OHEP ELIGIBILITY GUIDELINES for MEAP and EUSP		
Household Size	Maximum Monthly Income	Maximum Yearly Income
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. 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 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/>
- **Apply in Person:** Call ahead to your local OHEP office to schedule an appointment (as

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available) or to see if they are taking limited walk-ins.

- **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. Some OHEP offices will have a secure lockbox to drop-off applications. Secure lockboxes are not available at all sites. 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.

[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, as they are waiving this requirement through 12/31/2020.
 - 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, clients do not need a turn-off notice to receive assistance through 12/31/2020.
5. The client has not received help from the Fuel Fund in the past 12 months.

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. If the person is already a client of the Fuel Fund, they can email any questions or payment information to 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.

****If your client has past due water bills reach out to their provider to make a payment plan. In accordance with the Public Service Commission ruling private 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. Please also reference the Water Information Sheet on the OPC website.**

****If your client’s employment was affected by the emergency closures they may be eligible for Unemployment Benefits. Employees can find information and submit an online application at <https://www.dllr.state.md.us/employment/unemployment.shtml> or call 800-827-4839.**