

WHAT TO DO IN A SHUT OFF

WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS DOCUMENT

This document is here to provide suggestions on how to handle some tough situations that might come up while your utility is shut off. During this time, you might have to make hard choices. Talk to people you trust. Ask your friends, family, neighbors, and any community or church groups you know for help. They might be able to offer support when you need it.

The Maryland Office of People's Counsel

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Don’t forget to take care of yourself.

This situation is stressful. It is very important to take care of yourself, especially when things get tough. You might be helping others, but don’t forget about you. If you need to talk to someone, you can reach out to the Pro Bono Counseling Center (https://www.probonocounseling.org/). This service is free.They have friendly counselors ready to listen to any problems you might have, whether you’re feeling sad, worried, or just stuck.

- To talk with someone immediately through their WARMline, call 410-598-0234
- If you would like free long-term counseling, call the intake line at 410-825-1001

If you are feeling suicidal, immediately go to a local emergency room or call 988. 988 is a help hotline that's available 24/7/365 (https://988helpline.org/). You are not alone.

You can call, text, or chat online at https://988helpline.org/. Here’s how to reach them:

- Call 9-8-8
- Text 9-8-8
- Chat online at https://988lifeline.org

Suggestions on how to light your home at night

We recommend that you do not use candles to light your home. Candles can easily start fires, and there have been many sad stories about people getting hurt this way. It’s important to be safe when lighting your home in the evening! Here are some tips:

We do not recommend that you use candles, but if you do, use candles wisely: If you choose to use candles, make sure to place them on stable surfaces and keep them away from anything flammable, like curtains or paper, or anything that can knock them over, like children or pets. Always blow them out before going to bed, or when you are not watching them, and consider counting the number of candles you light and writing it down so that you remember to blow them **all** out Do not use candles (or anything that creates a flame) near oxygen tanks. This can lead to a massive fire.

Flashlights are great: Instead of candles, consider using flashlights. They are safer and still provide good light. Make sure to have extra batteries on hand.

String lights: You could also use battery-operated string lights. They can provide low-light, but without the risks of candles.

LED-battery operated candles: Battery operated candles may last longer than most options and are safe alternatives to real candles.

TIP: Many communities have “buy nothing” groups on social media, and you can often obtain items quickly, for free!

Suggestions on what to do if someone in the home has a medical issue

If you have someone in your home that has a medical problem when your utility is shut off, it can be really stressful. First, call the person’s doctor to talk about their health needs.

If you or someone in your home takes medicine that needs to be kept in the fridge, ask the person’s doctor how long it can be without refrigeration and how to tell if it’s still safe to use. You might also keep your medicine in a cooler with ice packs. Check with your doctor to make sure that’s okay. If you are unable to reach the person’s doctor, pharmacists are a great resource for questions about medicines and can sometimes be easier to access than doctors since there are walk up counters in many stores.

If you have medical equipment that needs electricity, you might want to go to places like libraries or community centers to charge your devices.

If you’re worried about your health at any point, call your doctor or go to the emergency room nearby.

If you are worried about Child Protective Services becoming involved

It’s normal to worry about your kids when things get tough. It’s important to make a plan to keep your kids safe when your utility is shut off. You can also gather emergency supplies ahead of time, like coolers for food and medicine, ice packs, flashlights and battery-operated lights.

Things to think about when making a plan for your children

- If it is really cold/hot outside, where will they sleep? Are the children old enough to safely sleep with blankets? https://safesleep.mo.gov/american-academy-of-pediatrics-recommendations/#:~:text=Avoid%20soft%2C%20loose%20bedding,%2C%20suffocation%2C%20entrapment%20and%20strangulation.
- If they have medical equipment, like a nebulizer, how will you make sure they can use that equipment?
- If there is no refrigeration in the home, how will you feed them?
- If there are no lights or internet, how will they do their homework?
- What is your plan to catch up on the bill and get reconnected?

Don't hesitate to ask for help from community resources to support you and your plan.

Make sure your children can still get their homework done

If your lights are out and you have kids in school, here are some steps you can consider:

1. Talk to the school social worker: If you're worried about how your child will get their homework done, or your child needs other support, you can reach out to the school social worker. They might be able to help.
2. Contact the teacher: You can reach out to your child's teacher to see if they can give printed homework or offer other options to help your child keep up.
3. Visit the library or community center: If you can, take your child to the library or a community center. They usually have internet access and printers that your child can use.

These steps can help make things easier while you're dealing with the situation.

Can you be evicted when your utility is shut-off if you are renting?

If the lights are turned off in your home because you couldn't keep up with the utility bill, your landlord might start the eviction process. Check your lease to see what it says about this situation. Many leases require you to keep utilities on for your health and safety.

If your landlord begins the eviction process because your utilities are off, it's important to contact a lawyer right away. They can help you understand your lease and may be able to represent you in court.

If your landlord locks you out of your place without following the proper eviction steps, call the local police and talk to a lawyer. Your landlord cannot lock you out without giving you proper notice and going through the eviction process.

* If you live in Section 8 housing, you will be evicted and could lose your voucher. The landlord will still need to go through the proper eviction process. Contact your case manager immediately if you are finding yourself in this situation.

To find free legal help:

- Contact Maryland Legal Aid: 410-951-7777
- Contact Maryland Volunteer Lawyer Service: 410-547-6537
- Call 2-1-1

How to keep your phone charged

Nowadays, your phone is your lifeline and it is important to keep it charged. Without power, there are still places you might be able to get this done.:

1. Public libraries: Many have charging stations or outlets available.
2. Cafés, restaurants, and laundromats: Places like Starbucks or fast-food restaurants often have outlets for customers.
3. Shopping malls: Look for charging stations or outlets in seating areas.
4. Community Centers: Check if local centers offer charging options.
5. Friends or family: Visit someone who has power and can help you charge your device.
6. Public transportation hubs: Train or bus stations might have charging stations.
7. Electric vehicle charging stations: If you have access to an EV charging station, some have outlets for charging devices.
8. Hospital waiting areas: Many hospitals have charging stations for visitors.

Make sure to bring your charging cable. Always check with staff or signs to ensure charging is allowed, and be mindful of your device while it's charging in public spaces.

Where to access the internet

If you don’t have power at home, there are places available where you might be able to connect.

1. Public libraries: Many libraries have free Wi-Fi and charging stations.
2. Cafés and restaurants: Places like Starbucks, McDonald's, or local coffee shops often provide free Wi-Fi.
3. Community Centers: Check for local community centers that may offer internet access.
4. Shopping malls: Many malls have free Wi-Fi available in common areas.
5. Friends or family: Consider visiting someone who has power and internet.
6. Public parks: Some parks provide Wi-Fi access, especially in urban areas.

Make sure to check if you need to bring your own device and consider battery life if you can’t charge it at home.

Places to stay cool/warm without gas/electric in your home

If your utility is shut off out and it’s too hot or cold to stay at home, here are some safe options to consider:

1. Find a warming or cooling station: During the day, you can go to places like libraries, senior centers, or community centers that are set up as warming or cooling stations. You can call 2-1-1 to find the nearest one.
2. Emergency shelters: If you need a place to stay overnight, look for emergency homeless shelters. It’s understandable to feel uneasy about this, so you might also reach out to friends or family to see if they can help.
3. 24-hour businesses: Places that stay open for 24-hours could be a resource.

STAY SAFE:

-Never use a gas oven to heat your home. Gas ovens produce carbon monoxide, a toxic gas. Leaving the oven door open, or running a gas oven for a long amount of time, can be very dangerous and could lead to a fire, or carbon monoxide poisoning, and serious harm or death.

-Never use a gasoline powered generator inside your home, or in any enclosed space. Gasoline powered generators produce carbon monoxide, a toxic gas, and entire families have been found dead after using gas generators inside homes and garages. For more

information on how to safely deal with the loss of electricity in your home, you can visit: https://cityofenglewood.org/1189/Staying-Safe-While-Using-Portable-Genera#:~:text=Gasoline%20Generators%20Produce%20Carbon%20Monoxide,no%20fumes%20to%20alert%20us.

-Your local fire station or local government may have FREE smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors that you can install in your home. These detectors save lives.

Where to get free food for yourself and pets

When your utility is shut off, you likely have limited cooking options. When feeding your family, think about foods that are shelf-stable and that do not need to be heated or cooled.

If you're looking for free food for yourself and your family, consider:

1. Food pantries: Local food banks or pantries often provide free groceries to those in need. https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank
2. https://mdfoodbank.org/find-food/
3. Soup kitchens: Many communities have soup kitchens that offer free, sit down meals.
4. Community organizations: Nonprofits and churches sometimes hold food distribution events.
5. Government assistance programs: Check for programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), also known as food stamps, that can provide support.
6. Local schools: Some schools offer free meals for families, especially during breaks. Reach out to the school social worker.
7. Community gardens: Some gardens have programs where you can pick fresh produce for free.

To locate these resources, call 2-1-1.

TIP: Social media and community groups: Check local community groups or “buy nothing” groups on platforms like Facebook; people often share resources or food donations.

If you are looking for free pet food:

If you're looking for free pet food, here are some options to consider:

1. Local animal shelters: Many shelters have pet food banks or can provide resources for free food.
2. Food pantries: Some food banks and pantries also offer pet food alongside human food.
3. Nonprofit organizations: Groups like local humane societies and animal shelters may have programs to help pet owners in need.
4. https://www.pethelpfinder.org/m/phf
   https://www.humanesociety.org/resources/are-you-having-trouble-affording-your-pet
5. Veterinary clinics: Some clinics may have resources or know of local programs providing free pet food.
6. Social media and community groups: Check local community groups or "buy nothing" groups on platforms like Facebook; people often share resources or pet food donations.
7. Pet supply stores: Occasionally, stores run promotions or giveaways for pet food, especially during special events.

Suggestions of places to shower without gas/electric at home

If you need a place to shower while your utility is shut off, there are places where you can shower for free or for a small fee.

1. Gyms or fitness centers: Many gyms allow non-members to use their showers for a fee or during a trial visit.
2. Community centers: Some community centers offer shower facilities for public use.
3. Public swimming pools: Check if local pools have showers available for patrons.
4. Campgrounds: If you have access to a nearby campground, they often have shower facilities.
5. Hotels or motels: Some may allow you to use their facilities for a fee, even if you're not staying overnight.
6. Friends or family: Reach out to someone nearby who may have a shower you can use.

7. Faith-based organizations: Churches or religious organizations sometimes offer showers for those in need.

Make sure to check ahead if you need to bring anything, like toiletries or towels.

Suggestions on places to do your laundry without power

If you need to clean your clothes without power at home, here are some options:

1. Laundromats: Many laundromats have self-service machines, and some may even have generators or backup power to run their machines if power is out in the entire area.
2. Friends or family: Ask to use their laundry facilities if they have power.
3. Community centers: Some may offer laundry services or facilities, especially in times of need.
4. Hotels or motels: If you're near a hotel, they might have laundry services or machines available for guests.
5. Hand washing: If you have access to water, you can wash clothes by hand in a sink or bathtub and hang them to dry.
6. Emergency shelters and nonprofits: Call 2-1-1 to find what emergency shelters and nonprofits that may offer this service for free.

Always check for availability and any fees that may apply.

Where can you look for work without power?

If you're looking for work and don't have power or internet access, here are some options:

- Visit your local library: Libraries usually have computers that you can use to search for jobs. If you need help, don't hesitate to ask a librarian.

- Go to a job center: Local job centers offer many services for job seekers at no cost. You can find a local job center by calling 2-1-1 or by checking out this website: .https://labor.maryland.gov/county/

They have staff who can help you with things like:

    - Career exploration

- Training program referrals
- Job placement assistance
- Resume preparation
- Workshops to improve your job skills

Make sure the utility bill is yours

If you live with other people, the utility company might mistakenly try to make you responsible for a bill that isn't yours. The utility company may also mistakenly try to make you responsible for the utility bill of a family member or roommate who has passed away. If your name isn't on the utility account, the utility should not try to hold you legally responsible for the bill.

You can start a new utility account in your name, but here are some exceptions to this rule, like in cases of energy theft. There are also rules about starting a new account if the person whose name was on the overdue account lives in the home with you. These rules can be complicated, so if you have questions, you can contact the Office of People's Counsel at 410-767-8150.

If you believe you are being wrongly held responsible for a bill that isn't yours, you can file a complaint against the utility company with the Public Service Commission.

File a complaint online: https://mdpsc.my.site.com/complaints/s/

What happens if the overdue utility bill is really large?

If you have a really big past due bill with the utility company, you will need to pay the full amount before they will turn your service back on. When you restart the service, the utility company will likely ask for another security deposit. You can ask that you pay down the security deposit over a three month period.

- If you think you can pay the bill over time, ask the utility company if they can set up a payment plan. They don't have to agree, but it could be a good option if you can pay it off soon.
- If you feel like you'll never be able to pay the bill, you might want to talk to a lawyer about options like bankruptcy.
- If your bill goes to collections, you'll need to work directly with the collection company. Be careful about taking payday loans, as they can make things worse.

Whatever option is right for you, make sure to apply for help from programs like energy assistance, the Fuel Fund, local churches, and nonprofits. You can call 2-1-1 to find a complete list of resources.