

As Residents Pile Up \$280 Million in Utility Bills, Aid Organizations Scramble to Help

By Brendan Crowley
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Connecticut's moratorium preventing utility shut offs officially ended on Wednesday, and customers with unpaid balances could soon be receiving notices in the mail that their electricity could be shut off.

The state's largest electric utilities, Eversource and United Illuminating, have reported a total of nearly 900,000 customers with some unpaid electric bills, though a large proportion of those are overdue by less than a month. Data from the utilities for customers already enrolled in payment plans show that the average overdue bill is over \$1,000 – as some customers had bills pile up during the moratorium that prevented utility disconnections for about 18 months.

Those bills can be daunting, but advocates say there is still time to act to make sure the lights aren't turned off, and because of protections for customers with financial hardships and payment plans available, there is "absolutely no reason" that any residential customer should have their power turned off at this point, Center For Children's Advocacy attorney Bonnie Roswig said.

Customers with low incomes or who receive government assistance should be eligible for a [financial hardship](#) designation that protects them from having their power shut off between Nov. 1 and May 1.

Any customer enrolled in and making payments on a payment plan also can't be shut off. There are payment plans available specifically for low-income customers, and everyone with an overdue balance is eligible to sign up for a COVID-19 payment plan until the end of September – or until Gov. Ned Lamont's emergency powers expire, if lawmakers decide to extend them in a special session this month.

Notices warning that customers could have their utilities shut off will guide customers to call their utility company to find out for which programs they qualify – and that communication is where low-income advocates see the most potential for customers to fall through the cracks.

Roswig said her group had learned that the best way to communicate with people who are financially vulnerable is by phone, rather than through complex written notices. According to Roswig, customers who receive shut off notices will call the companies, and the customer service representatives at the company just need to give people the basic information they need, clearly and directly.

Both Eversource and United Illuminating have been issued fines by PURA this year after the authority reviewed customer service calls and found cases where customers were given inaccurate or incomplete information about payment and hardship plans – a situation that led PURA to [reject the utilities' requests](#) to resume shut offs of residential customers this spring.

After working with the utilities to improve their communications, and with the implementation of aid programs like UNITE-CT, PURA determined that shutoffs for unpaid utility bills could resume, and that utilities could start sending disconnection notices starting Sept. 15.

"They need clear, direct information, and our experience periodically in the past is that this information hasn't always been given to customers," Roswig said. "And it's such a critical time. People really do panic over the possibility that their lights will be shut off."

Roswig said she's concerned that there are still many people who are eligible for financial hardship protections, but have not been "coded" in the utility's billing system. She said she's hopeful that representatives of the electric companies will walk those customers through the process and find out what programs they are eligible for.

Finding those people who are eligible for hardship protections but haven't been signed up will be key over the next month, said Gannon Long, Director of Policy for Operation Fuel.

Roswig said it's a positive step that PURA has said its Office of Education, Outreach and Enforcement will be monitoring calls to make sure they are giving customers the right information. But if any customers have issues with their utility, Roswig said they should call the [PURA complaint line](#), or her at 860-545-8581 for help.

The problem of unpaid bills isn't going away

The moratorium may have encouraged people to pay nothing on their electric bill for 18 months and pile up massive arrearages. That is evident in the 788 requests for assistance Operation Fuel has received between July and September, up 36 percent over 2020 – and that is before a wave of requests they expect starting Wednesday as customers start to receive shut off notices.

In August, Eversource reported that its residential electric customers have a total of \$280.2 million in bills that are overdue by more than two months, of which about 45 percent is owed by customers who have a financial hardship designation.

Advocates are clear that there is help available. Utilities have existing assistance programs that they will help eligible customers sign up for, and there are special programs for COVID assistance, like the UNITE-CT program that distributes federal aid to help people pay overdue rent and utility bills – which has distributed \$82.9 million of its available \$212 million, including distributing \$3.8 million in utility assistance so far.

There is also [Operation Fuel](#), which offers grants of its own of up to \$500 to help people with their overdue electric and heating bills, and can connect them with other assistance programs, get eligible customers designated as having a financial hardship with their utilities, and even connect them to services that can lower their bills long-term, like energy efficiency programs.

That said, it's not a new situation for Connecticut by any means. For poorer people, keeping up with the fourth-highest residential electric rates in the lower 48 states is [always a reach](#).

“What happens for poor people in Connecticut every May is it becomes a crisis because they just can't afford their bills,” Roswig said. “Prior to the pandemic, people just had their service terminated, so between May and November, people live without one utility service or another.”

If someone is on a disability program receiving \$800 a month, and are paying \$250 a month for their electricity, it's an untenable situation, Roswig said. Those customers continue to pile up unpaid bills, which eventually are passed on to everyone else. It's a situation where thousands of customers have their utilities shut off every year, and everyone ends up with higher bills anyway.

At PURA, the idea of lower rates for low-income customers has been a topic of discussion, and Connecticut Water this year became the first utility to have a [low-income rate approved](#) by the authority.

It's an idea that faces some opposition for effectively having other customers subsidize the utility costs of poorer customers, but ultimately, that's already what is happening, Roswig said. Giving poorer customers a rate that they can actually afford would mean more of those customers are paying something, rather than just paying nothing because they can't afford the entire bill, she said.

“It just doesn't help anyone when there's no option for people to pay something that's affordable,” Roswig said. “We're making people choose between lights and food, basically. And they're choosing food.”