

Maryland Office of People's Counsel

Maintaining Utility Services During the COVID-19 Crisis

ALERT

All Marylanders are affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Over the past few weeks, individuals have voluntarily stayed away from public venues, been required to isolate or quarantine at home, are sick at home, or have been required to work at home. Schools and child care facilities are closed down. The most recent Governor's Executive Order requires us to stay home except for very limited reasons. Businesses have been ordered closed, and people laid off, applying for unemployment or experiencing reduced income in their households.

During this time of crisis, the need for electricity, gas and water is a matter of both personal and public health and safety. To assist you and your clients, the Office of People's Counsel (OPC) has developed **Information Sheets to answer questions on utility bills, bill payments, and service disconnections for each gas and electric utility, and single Information Sheets for water services and for phone and internet services. We also have provided updated information about assistance programs for those who have experienced a loss of or reduced income. They are available at www.opc.maryland.gov.**

Please read and share this information with other agencies, your colleagues and your clients. If you or your clients experience a problem related to payment plans, service disconnections, or reconnections, or have a question, **please contact OPC at DLInfo OPC@maryland.gov**. We review emails several times a day, and will respond to you promptly.

TIPS

NO SHUT OFFS DURING THE STATE OF EMERGENCY. Governor Hogan has issued an Executive Order that prohibits shut-offs of gas, electric, water, phone, internet and cable services during the State of Emergency, except for safety or hazard reasons. Some utilities have made additional commitments to work with customers on reconnections. Check out the Information Sheets for more details.

PAY WHAT YOU CAN. However difficult the crisis period may be, OPC also is concerned about the “cliff” that can occur when the utility shut-off moratoria ends. We have been through some of this before, but nothing as broad and lengthy as the COVID-19 emergency. OPC is strongly recommending that customers who have past-due bills or have lost income, contact their utilities and let them know about their financial situation. Ask the company to work out a payment plan during this emergency and encourage clients to pay what they can, however little. OPC is working with our national association and national utility groups to try to avoid a post-moratorium bill payment problem. However, at this time, we do not know what will happen with service disconnections after the State of Emergency ends.

LAID OFF and REDUCED INCOME WORKERS – APPLY FOR ENERGY ASSISTANCE. Agencies will experience a surge of new inquiries and applications for assistance of different types. Whatever the request, OPC urges all agencies to consider clients with reduced or loss of income for energy assistance through the Office of Home Energy Programs (OHEP). Only 25% of existing low-income households receive energy assistance benefits. Clients who are newly under or unemployed are often unfamiliar with OHEP programs. **OHEP ENERGY ASSISTANCE CAN HELP WITH ARREARAGES AND CURRENT BILLS. FEDERAL MONEY WILL BE MADE AVAILABLE TO THE STATES TO ASSIST WITH WORKERS AFFECTED BY THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY.**

SHARE THIS INFORMATION THROUGH YOUR OWN NETWORKS – FOR EXAMPLE, SCHOOLS, COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS, HEALTH CARE FACILITIES AND ORGANIZATIONS, UNIONS AND HOUSING ORGANIZATIONS.