

Partnering with Families to Build Economic Security During Emergencies



How Head Start Can Help You Access Utilities Assistance

You may have trouble paying for utilities—such as heating, cooling, your cell phone, and internet service—during emergencies and natural disasters. Head Start and Early Head Start **family services staff and home visitors** can partner with you to:

- Access energy assistance
- Access cell phone and internet service assistance
- Track your progress and celebrate your successes



Spotlight On: Utilities Assistance

Access Energy Assistance

You may struggle to pay your electric, gas, heating oil, and water bills during an emergency or natural disaster.

- **Contact utility company.** As a general rule of thumb, the best thing to do when you can't pay your bills is to call the utility company and open up a line of communication.
 - You can call and explain your situation and see what kind of arrangements can be made with the utility.
 - Remember to keep a written record that you called and explained your hardship. Write down the day and time of your call, as well as the name of the customer service representative you spoke with.

- You can also check with your local government to see if a state of emergency has been declared for your community. If so, service shutoffs may be temporarily suspended.
- **New funding.** Recent federal legislation provides \$900 million additional funds to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).
 - The funding was approved to help families with their home energy needs during the national emergency created by the coronavirus.
 - You can contact your state’s or Tribe’s Low-Income Energy Office to determine your eligibility and apply for energy assistance. Visit the LIHEAP website to learn more.
- **National Energy Assistance Referral (NEAR).** If you need help finding your local Low-Income Energy Office, you can call the National Energy Assistance Referral (NEAR) service toll-free at 1-866-674-6327 or TTY 1-866-367-6228.
 - You can also visit the NEAR website or email energyassistance@ncat.org. Remember to include your city, county, and state in your email message.
 - NEAR is a free service for people who want information on how to apply for LIHEAP. This program may pay part of the energy bills of eligible families with low incomes.
- **Ineligible for LIHEAP.** If your income is too high to qualify for LIHEAP but you need help paying for energy bills, a local social services agency or nonprofit organization may have funds to help. Ask you family services staff or home visitor to help you find local agencies that can help.
 - You can also contact your gas, oil, or electric company to ask about budget billing programs or new payment options, especially for customers with disabilities who are on Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

Access Phone and Internet Service Assistance

Cell phones, landline phones, and internet access are critical services during emergencies and natural disasters. You need them to communicate with others and access information when face-to-face interactions are limited.

- **Contact your service provider.** If you are worried about paying your bill, reach out to your landline phone, cell phone, or internet service company.
 - Ask what kind of arrangements they can make to help you, such as setting up a payment plan.
 - Also ask if the company has decided to waive late fees or suspensions of service during the emergency.

- **Access financial assistance.** If you don't have access to the internet or need help paying for landline phone or cell phone service, your family services staff or home visitor can connect you to Lifeline. Lifeline is a federal program that helps make communications services more affordable. Lifeline gives subscribers a discount on monthly telephone and internet services purchased from participating companies.
- **Access computers at your Head Start program.** Ask program staff if families can use computers and internet access at your program's location during the emergency.

Track Your Progress and Celebrate Your Successes

Family services staff and home visitors can follow up with you about your progress toward accessing utilities assistance. Celebrate your successes!

Other Family Tip Sheets about building your family's economic security during emergencies are available. Check with your Head Start and Early Head Start family services staff or home visitor.

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