

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) continues its advocacy for Ohio's residential utility consumers and its outreach efforts to keep Ohioans informed about important utility matters during the coronavirus crisis. Although OCC's physical outreach is currently suspended, we continue to diligently provide much needed information in a variety of ways. **This situation is fluid and information may change daily.**

The **PUCO ordered utilities under their jurisdiction to not disconnect customers for non-payment and to review their policies and take measures to keep consumers connected during this critical time.** However, they stressed that the order **does not eliminate any payment obligations**, so customers should work with their utilities on workable payment arrangements. **Many utilities are not only avoiding terminations, but also reconnecting without fees, waiving late fees and deposits, and providing payment arrangements** beyond those described in OCC's fact sheet [Your Guide to Energy Disconnection and Reconnection](#). **Consumers should contact their utility directly for what measures are currently in place.**

Agencies that are seeing, or foresee a problem, with utilities can make public comment to the PUCO to provide suggestions on how to handle the evolving situation by email at [ContactthePUCO@puco.ohio.gov](mailto:ContactthePUCO@puco.ohio.gov) or by mail at 180 East Broad St., Columbus, OH 43215. Comments must reference Case No. 20-591-AU-ORD.

Although utilities are not currently disconnecting service during this health crisis, it is still important to know that **people with a health condition who would be affected by disconnected utility services may be able to [Keep Utilities on with a Medical Certification Waiver](#).** State law prevents investor-owned utilities from disconnecting a consumer's electric and natural gas services for nonpayment if a permanent member of the household has a medical condition defined as "especially dangerous" to health and there is a medical certification waiver on file with the utility company from a medical professional. The certification can keep services connected up to three times in any 12-month period. Certification forms must be completed for each case of disconnection or reconnection and are valid for 30 days each.

The [Winter Reconnect Order \(WRO\)](#) has been extended through **May 1, 2020** to reconnect or to avoid disconnection of investor-owned utilities. There are no income guidelines for eligibility, but it does not apply to municipally owned utilities or rural electric co-ops.

To align with the WRO, **the Winter Crisis Program (WCP) deadline has been extended to May 1** for income eligible households if they have been disconnected, or face disconnection, to have their service restored or maintained. The WCP is a provision of the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP).

**The HEAP deadline has been extended to June 1** to provide a one-time payment toward winter heating bills for consumers with a household income at or below 175 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. An online application is available at [www.energyhelp.ohio.gov](http://www.energyhelp.ohio.gov). Information for both HEAP and the WCP can be found on OCC's fact sheet [Home Energy Assistance Program: HEAP guidelines](#).

Ohioans enrolling in PIPP Plus for the first time, applying for the WCP or with incomes at or below 30 percent of the federal poverty guidelines are no longer required to visit their local community action agency for an in-person interview during the crisis. Ohioans can find their local community action by visiting [www.energyhelp.ohio.gov](http://www.energyhelp.ohio.gov) or by calling 1-800-282-0880.

Ohio's legislature recently passed HB 197 which included prohibiting municipal water disconnections during the state of emergency. On March 31, the Ohio EPA director signed an **order preventing public water systems from shutting off water service due to non-payment during the declared state of emergency and reconnect (without reconnection fees) customers who have had their service disconnected dating back to January 1, 2020**. Customers eligible to have service reinstated **must contact their water utility to request the reconnection**. It is important to understand that **this order does not excuse the customer from paying the bill**. When the service is turned back on after a period inactivity, the system will need to be flushed first and the water utility should provide this guidance. The Ohio EPA will also post that information on <http://coronavirus.ohio.gov>. The order can be viewed at [www.epa.state.oh.us/Portals/28/documents/pws/pws%20emergency%20grayscale.pdf](http://www.epa.state.oh.us/Portals/28/documents/pws/pws%20emergency%20grayscale.pdf).

Upon OCC's urging, the **PUCO suspended door-to-door sales by energy marketers** to avoid unnecessary social interactions. Their press release can be viewed at [www.puco.ohio.gov/media-room/media-releases/puco-directs-competitive-energy-suppliers-to-halt-door-to-door-in-person-marketing/](http://www.puco.ohio.gov/media-room/media-releases/puco-directs-competitive-energy-suppliers-to-halt-door-to-door-in-person-marketing/).

The **PUCO also suspended in-person meter readings and any other non-essential work** that would create unnecessary social contact. Any functions that are necessary to initiate new service or to ensure the continuity of service are to be deemed essential and should continue during the state of emergency. Their press release can be viewed at [www.puco.ohio.gov/media-room/media-releases/puco-directs-utilities-to-suspend-meter-readings-non-essential-work1/](http://www.puco.ohio.gov/media-room/media-releases/puco-directs-utilities-to-suspend-meter-readings-non-essential-work1/). **Customers wishing to avoid an estimated bill can contact their utility about reading their own meter**. OCC offers information on [Electric Meter Reading](#) and how to read the natural gas meter is included on the [Guide to Understanding Your Natural Gas Bill](#) fact sheet.

Even with all these measures in place, **scammers are likely to try to exploit this crisis**. OCC offers a fact sheet on [How to Avoid Utility Scams and Fraud](#).

**As already stated, this situation is fluid and information may change daily**. OCC is posting updates at [www.occ.ohio.gov](http://www.occ.ohio.gov) and via Twitter [@OCC4Consumers](#). If you have any questions, please contact me.