



Energy Consumer Rights Manual

A Guide to Keeping
the Lights on in California



Power@Home
TURN-THE UTILITY REFORM NETWORK

TURN - The Utility Reform Network
TURN.org

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INTRODUCTION

Utilities are basic human rights

Access to affordable, safe, and reliable electricity and gas services plays a huge part in our lives. From the time we wake up until we go to sleep, many of our activities throughout the day are dependent upon access to utilities. Turning on lights in the evening, charging our phones, cooking meals, showering with hot water, cooling or warming our homes—**all of it requires energy.**

Despite the necessity of energy, universal access is far from realized. “Gas and electricity bills can consume over 40% of income for low income households in California.”¹ Utility shutoffs regularly result in unnecessary deaths due to fires caused by candles, extension cords, or carbon monoxide poisoning from portable heaters. Shutoffs increased by 50 percent between 2010 and 2017. In 2018, there were over 886,000 shutoffs in California.² This number is the equivalent of all the households in San Francisco and San Diego being shut off at the same time. **This amounts to about 3 million people in the dark—most of whom were children.**

As many California residents face an increasingly high cost of living and stagnant wages, they look for ways to save money and reduce their utility bills. They cut back on their spending, make sure to turn off all the lights when not in use, and in many cases they make difficult tradeoffs about which bills to pay first, or give up food, medicine, or other necessities in order to pay their utility bills.

Unfortunately, when customers fall behind on their utility bills, utility companies shut them off. To make matters worse, people without power often resort to unsafe practices, resulting in perilous living conditions for themselves and their neighbors. **There must be a better solution to ensure access to life-sustaining utility service.**

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC or Commission), which regulates investor-owned utilities (**IOUs**), is responsible for ensuring that California utility customers have **safe** and **reliable** utility service at **reasonable rates**. Unfortunately, the CPUC has failed to take strong action to make sure utilities operate efficiently and safely and keep costs low for consumers.

Where the CPUC has fallen short, TURN and other consumer and grassroots organizations have stepped in to demand universal utility service as a basic human right!



Lower bills. Livable planet.

ABOUT TURN

TURN - The Utility Reform Network believes that we can and should live in a society where energy, broadband, and phone services are treated as basic rights for all families. We are a social justice organization representing

families in California at the California Public Utilities Commission. TURN works to protect and expand consumer protections and ensure fair rates. We organize underserved and economically vulnerable community members to share their lived experience with decision-makers. TURN works to address the systemic disparities faced by communities of color. We are committed to ensuring access and equity in energy and telecommunications for all California families. We continue to lead the discourse on issues related to regulated utilities in California. TURN is a 501c3 nonprofit that has operated in California since 1973.

The mission of TURN is to:

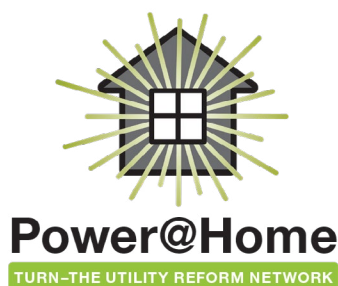
- Represent the interests of residential energy and telecommunications customers in decision-making processes at the CPUC and other regulatory agencies.
- Educate consumers, policymakers, and the general public on policy proposals that impact climate justice, public health and safety, reliability, affordability, and customer service.
- Organize in underserved communities to ensure the people most impacted by CPUC decisions have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process.

Our strategy

TURN deploys its team of attorneys, community organizers, analysts, and communications experts to fight for — the most green for the least green — the cleanest energy and the best broadband and phone service at the lowest prices to consumers. We work together to:

- Expand the power of diverse grassroots communities to control their own destiny. We mobilize low-income communities and communities of color throughout California.
- Build coalitions that strategically align human, financial and messaging resources. We bring together economic, environmental, consumer and other intersecting social justice movements.
- Win concrete policy outcomes and institutional changes that impact communities. We fight for and win renewable energy and utility policies that are affordable.
- Define the terms of the political debate to leverage future wins. We shape compelling narratives for broadcast, print and social media.

POWER@HOME CAMPAIGN



TURN's Power@Home Campaign is a research, communication and action campaign designed to urge public health agencies, utility regulators, and elected officials to adopt goals and implement policies that address the public health and housing impacts of energy insecurity, especially utility shutoffs. The campaign targets California residents who receive utility service from investor-owned utility companies (IOUs) regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC).

In 2016, utility energy service was terminated 886,000 times in California households—representing about 3 million people, mostly children—a 50% increase from the 547,000 households who were shut off in 2010.² Utility shutoffs disproportionately threaten the health of low-income families, communities of color, people for whom English is not a dominant language, as well as individuals who are elderly, physically disabled, or have serious medical conditions. The loss of basic electricity or gas service causes tremendous hardship, undue stress, and risks to health and housing stability.

In order to reach our ultimate goals of achieving universal utility service for all California residents, the Power@Home Campaign engages in **5 key strategies**:

Research and data collection. The campaign researches and reports on the burden of energy insecurity and utility disconnections across the state, including examining disparities for communities of color and families struggling to make ends meet. By measuring the extent of the problem, we highlight its importance and track our progress toward energy justice for all families living in California.

Organizing and building power. The knowledge, people power and leadership of the communities most impacted by energy insecurity and utility shutoffs are critical to the success of our campaign. TURN partners with grassroots organizations across the state to mobilize communities of color and families struggling to make ends meet to share their stories and lead our advocacy efforts. TURN, these core grassroots partners, and a growing number of other public agencies, nonprofit stakeholders, and California residents are the driving force to ensure that everyone in California has Power@Home.

Advocacy and litigation. The campaign fights to pass and support implementation of state legislation and utility regulations to reduce energy insecurity and protect California residents from shutoffs.

Spreading the word. Raising awareness of the prevalence and impacts of energy insecurity and utility shutoffs is critical to making the case for change. TURN and our partners share stories and data through social media, op-eds, and public hearings.

Providing relief to Californians who are suffering. TURN provides training and guidance to direct service providers, public health practitioners, and other community advocates, to support their work with vulnerable communities to ensure energy security for struggling customers.

TURN launched the Power@Home Campaign in 2016. TURN sponsored SB 598 (Hueso) – The Shutoffs Reduction Act. Our collective advocacy resulted in passage of the bill. It directed the CPUC to open the Disconnections Proceeding to examine “New Approaches to Disconnections and Reconnections to Improve Energy Access and Contain Costs.” On June 11, 2020, the CPUC voted unanimously in favor of a decision in this proceeding, making California a national leader in utility customer protections. Below is a brief summary of what we won.

The IOUs are required to reduce disconnections by 47% by 2024

Shutoffs are now banned in many cases

- During extreme weather, when temperatures are above 100° F or below 32° F
- For customers who sign up for a 12-month payment plan
- For customers who have a LIHEAP pledge pending

Deposits and fees have been eliminated

- For new utility service
- For reconnection of service after a shutoff

New protections against requiring renters to pay a previous tenant’s bill

- Utilities must follow stricter guidelines when investigating whether a customer may be required to pay a bill that is in a different customer's name
- Utilities are required to provide service to customers during benefit-of-service investigations

Gas customer shutoff protections

- Field representatives must assist gas customers to make a payment to avoid disconnection
- Gas service must be re-established within 24 hours of payment
- Improved payment plans
- All customers qualify for a minimum 12-month payment plan if they fall behind on their bills
- Customers cannot be asked to pay more than 20 percent of an outstanding balance as the first payment on a payment plan

And so much more!

- Nurse Practitioners (NPs) and Physician’s Assistants (PAs) can certify customers for Medical Baseline eligibility
- Medical Baseline eligibility certifications can now be done electronically
- CARE and FERA customers may be eligible to sign up for the Arrearage Management Plan (AMP)
- CARE customers may be eligible for a new Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP) Pilot

HOW TO USE THIS TRAINING MANUAL

The goal of this manual is to provide community advocates and service providers throughout California the information and tools they need to help individuals and families manage their utility costs and avoid an electric or gas shutoff. This manual primarily addresses the rights of customers of investor-owned electric and gas companies. It is divided into 4 sections and various subsections, all listed in the Table of Contents, to help you find what you need quickly. **The electronic version of this manual allows users to click on a header in the table of contents that links directly to the subject listed.**

PART I

This section provides an overview of how utility services are provided and how utilities are regulated in California, summarizing the key stakeholders and the roles they play. It also introduces energy insecurity, what it is, how we measure it, how it impacts our health, and what it means for California residents facing an increasingly expensive and constrained housing market.

PART II

Here we examine why utility bills are so high. This section outlines common reasons bills become too high for California residents to pay—ranging from general unaffordability to unfair and illegal practices by utility companies and property owners. This section helps advocates understand the different circumstances that can lead to utility debt or shutoffs and help them acquire the knowledge to explain these challenges and their root causes.

PART III

In Part III we identify situations that could be addressed through the CPUC consumer complaint process. This section helps advocates identify complaints and provides resources and strategies to resolve consumer complaints.

PART IV

This section presents tools and approaches for helping customers conserve energy, register for discount programs, access assistance with bills and utility debt, and negotiate affordable payment plans.



Part I

Utilities and Energy Insecurity in California

UNDERSTAND

- The definition of "energy insecurity"
- Its impact on families

LEARN

- How utilities are provided
- The role of the CPUC

What is energy insecurity?

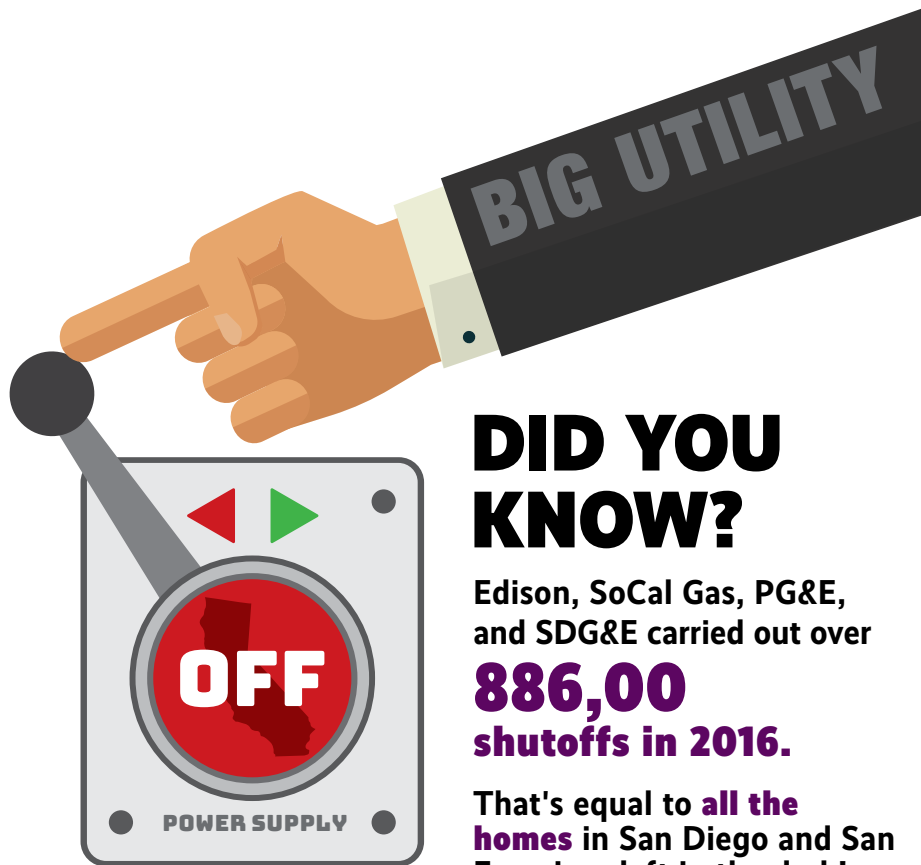
Energy insecurity occurs when basic energy needs **are out of reach for families**.

The 3 parts of energy insecurity³

Bills beyond reach. Families struggling to pay high energy bills are also faced with rising housing costs, forcing them to make difficult trade-offs between utilities, rent, food, and healthcare.

Poor quality housing. Due to the **persistent legacy of discriminatory housing policies**, low-income families of color are more likely to live in substandard housing with faulty heating or cooling and poor insulation that is unhealthy, unsafe and leads to higher utility bills.

Desperation. Families are forced to tolerate unsafe temperatures. They may use unsafe alternatives to heating or lighting such as stoves or candles in order to keep utility bills affordable.

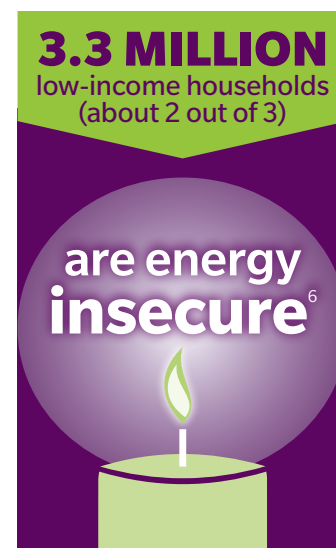


DID YOU KNOW?

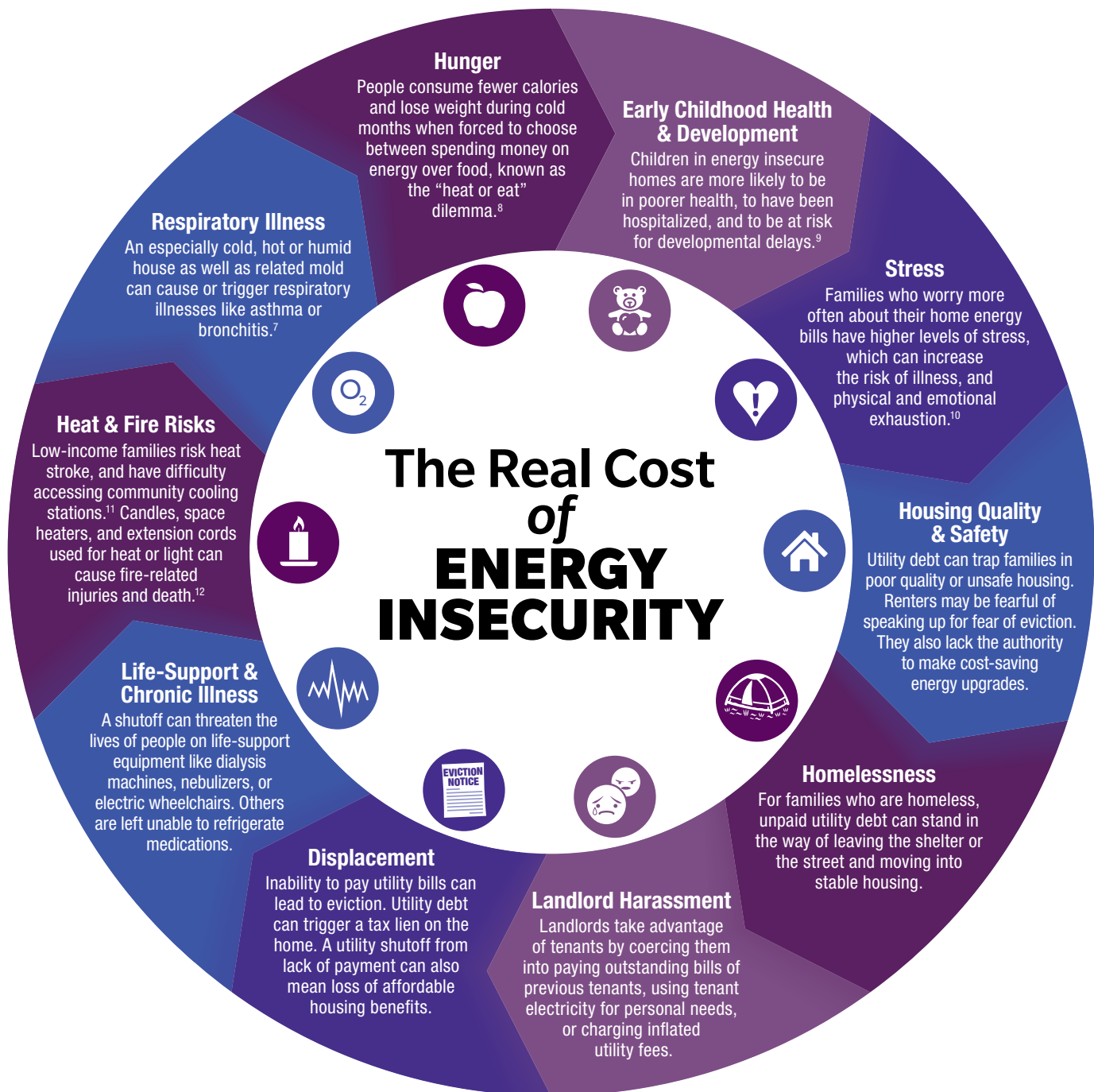
Edison, SoCal Gas, PG&E, and SDG&E carried out over **886,000 shutoffs in 2016.**

That's equal to **all the homes** in San Diego and San Francisco left in the dark!

Just like housing and food, energy bills are a major concern for California families. Even with utility discount programs, older adults, low-income families, and people of color are struggling to pay their bills.

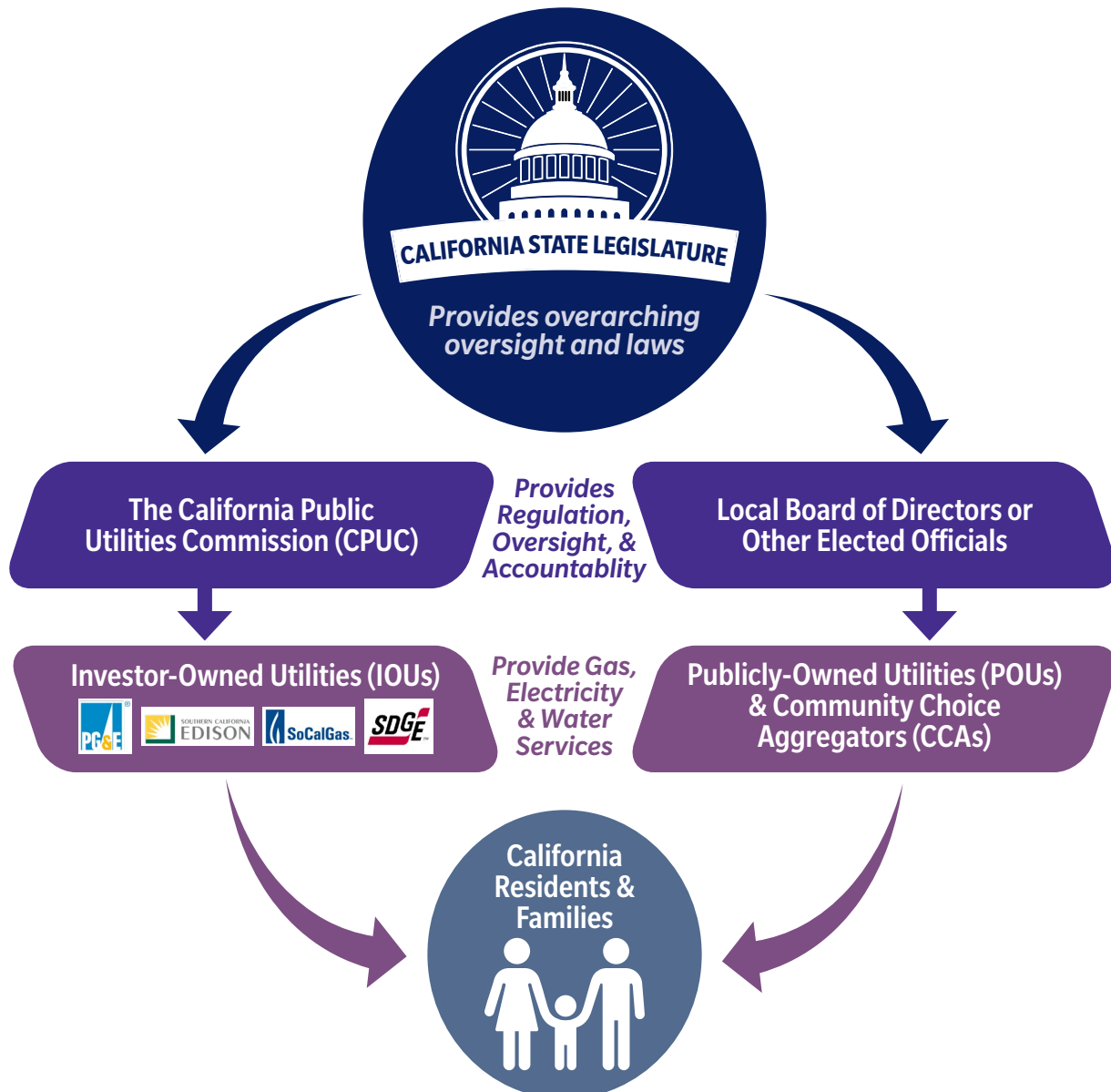


Energy insecurity threatens the health and safety of low-income families, especially children and people who are medically vulnerable. In a state where housing costs are already high, energy insecurity makes it even harder to find and keep housing.



How does California provide and regulate utilities?

In order to best support residents facing utility problems or advocate for improvements to our current utility system, it is important to understand the various stakeholders involved and their **roles in providing and overseeing utilities**:



Utility companies in California

There are several categories of electric and gas companies in California. The investor-owned utilities or IOUs are one category. The largest IOUs in California are Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), Southern California Edison Company (SCE), Southern California Gas Company (SoCalGas), and San Diego Gas & Electric Company (SDG&E). These companies are privately held and operate for profit. IOUs are beholden to their shareholders to make profits and are regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC).

Another category of utility companies includes municipal utilities, or more broadly, publicly-owned utilities or POUs which are publicly-owned and are supposed to operate in the interest of the public. POUs are subject to local public control and regulation. Examples include the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP), Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD), and the Modesto Irrigation District (MID). The CPUC has no jurisdiction over these utilities. Instead, they are governed by a local Board of Directors or by local elected officials. Because of this, it is difficult to provide helpful information that is relevant to all POUs. Customers of publicly-owned utilities should contact their municipal utility office, local city councilmember, or their Mayor's office to lodge their complaints.

Community Choice Aggregators (CCAs) are similar in some ways to POUs, but they do not deliver electricity to their customers. They are local government entities that generate and/or purchase electricity and use the local IOUs' infrastructure to deliver their commodity to customers. CCAs are governed by appointed boards.

Propane (bottled) gas and oil companies are not considered utility companies and are not regulated by the CPUC.

The role of the California Public Utilities Commission

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) is a state agency created by constitutional amendment to regulate investor-owned utilities in the state of California. The CPUC regulates telecommunications, electric, natural gas, water, railroad, rail transit and passenger transportation. The CPUC is responsible for assuring that California utility customers have **safe, reliable** utility service at **reasonable rates**, protecting utility customers from fraud and promoting the health of California's economy.

The Commission is comprised of a five-member board including the President of the Commission. Its members are appointed by the Governor and serve six-year staggered terms. Commissioners make all policy decisions, usually meeting twice a month to vote on issues noted on a public agenda. The CPUC headquarters are in San Francisco with field offices in Los Angeles and Sacramento. The CPUC holds public hearings, meetings and workshops throughout the state. Because the CPUC regulates utility services in California, consumer advocates will often need to turn to the CPUC to resolve complaints or to effect positive policy changes.



Part II

Unaffordable Bills and Unfair Billing Practices

UNDERSTAND

- The root cause of the current utility affordability crisis
- Common reasons why bills become unmanageable (besides constant rate hikes)



Common reasons for utility bill increases

One out of four California households struggles to cover the cost of their monthly energy bills.¹³ California utility rates are the highest in the country and rates continue to rise. Sometimes the IOUs engage in unjust billing practices that can make utility bills unmanageable. These practices can be addressed through the complaint process. Part II walks you through the most common reasons—beyond high rates—that can make a customer's bill skyrocket.

Late or missed payments

Many utility customers think they can pay their utility bills after the due date listed on the bill or make partial payments in an attempt to catch up. It is also not unusual for customers to believe that as long as they are paying something, they do not need to contact the utility company and that partial payments will be enough to keep the service on. Some utility companies allow customers to carry large balances on their bills for months at a time, particularly customers who have medical issues. This can result in high and unaffordable utility debt.

However, as the large balance accumulates, a shutoff notice will most likely be sent to the customer requesting payment of the entire past due balance. Out of desperation, many people will agree to a payment plan that may be unaffordable and continue to place a financial burden on a person who is still unable to pay the bill. If a customer defaults on—or breaks—too many payment plans because they agree to plans they can't afford or because their financial situation continues to deteriorate, their utility company may stop offering the customer alternative payment arrangements.

Any bill paid after the due date listed on the bill is considered late and can trigger a shutoff notice if the bill is not paid in full.

Estimated bills

There are several reasons why the utility may estimate a customer's bill and in some cases, this can result in a high bill.

Analog meters: If a customer has an analog meter, their meter is manually read one month and estimated the next month. In some cases the meter may not be read for two or three months. The customer's usage estimate is based on their historical usage data. If the estimated bill is higher or lower than actual usage, it will be corrected the next time the meter is manually read by a technician. If there are adjustments to the estimated bill, a customer can end up with either a credit or a higher bill for the corrected amount.

Additionally, customers who choose to keep their analog meter because they do not want a smart meter must pay opt-out fees. Not paying this fee will result in having an outstanding balance on a bill. The utility company can shut off a customer who does not pay this fee. For PG&E, SCE, SoCal Gas and SDG&E, non-CARE customers must pay a one-time fee of \$75 and \$10 a month for three years. CARE customers pay a one-time fee of \$10 and \$5 a month for three years.

Please note: Customers of SoCal Gas who are also customers of Southern California Edison (SCE) have to pay this fee twice if they opt out of having smart meters installed because they get gas from SoCal Gas and electricity from SCE.

Meter access: If the utility company cannot read the meter because the meter is not accessible or the customer refuses to allow the utility technician to read the meter, the usage will be estimated based on the customer's past usage at that address and/or the usage of similar customers in that area.

Defective meter: The utility may also estimate a customer's bill if the meter is not transmitting a customer's usage data accurately or if the meter is defective. This applies to the analog meter or a smart meter that the utility company may believe is not working properly.

Always check to see if the bill has been estimated. This information can be found in the monthly statement. You can dispute a billing estimate by looking at the usage comparison on the bills. You might be able to prove that there has been a billing error, especially if the bill is unusually high. This is discussed further in the section on back billing and meter error. The key point is that the utility can back bill a customer for amounts not included in an "estimated bill" for any period of time if the estimate is caused by an inaccessible meter or any other cause "within the control of the customer." **The utility can only back bill for three months due to meter error or other utility problems.**

Not my account

It is not unusual to hear from customers who have high bills because:

- They moved and received a bill from a previous address
- They are billed for a roommate's bill at the current address or from a previous address
- They moved and were asked or coerced into paying the previous tenant's or property owner's unpaid bill when they moved into a new residence

Bills from a previous address: When a customer sets up new service or re-establishes service at a different address they could be asked to pay any outstanding bills before the utility will turn on service. Alternatively, the customer's first bill may also reflect these charges. The utility has the right to ask for payment for any unpaid balances from any person who benefited from the energy use when they were 18 years or older.

Paying the roommate's or account holder's bill: Although a person signs an application for service and receives a bill in their name, all adults over 18 living at the same address are responsible for the bill. For example, three people move in together and service is set up in one of the individuals' names. The remaining roommates are responsible for the electricity or gas costs for the time that they lived there or for the time they benefited from the energy use. The remaining tenants can be held accountable for the unpaid bill even though the account holder moved out.

Another tenant's bill: An individual or family who moves into a new residence cannot be billed for the previous tenants' bill if they did not live with the previous tenant at that address. Utility companies have been known to bill new tenants for the previous tenants' past due balance if they suspect the new tenants were already living there and benefited from service at that address. **Customers who did not live at the address at any time and did not benefit from the electric or gas services are not responsible for the bill!**

The new tenant can prove that they did not live there by showing proof of previous residence such as a utility bill with their name and previous address, driver's license, voter registration documents, veteran benefits card, IRS documents, SSI or disability checks.

Unfortunately, submitting an individual's previous lease is not usually enough and additional documents will be needed to prove a person's prior residence.

The property owner's bill: It is not unusual to hear from customers who say that they are being threatened with a utility shutoff because a property owner or bank that owns the property is not paying the utility bills. When lenders foreclose on properties in California, utilities demand payment from those within their reach. Property owners who cannot collect from previous tenants have also been known to request the new tenant pay the previous tenant's bill as a condition for moving into the residence. **Customers who did not live at the address at any time and did not benefit from the electric or gas services billed are not responsible for the bill.**

Back billing

Back billing is the practice of retroactively billing for undercharged amounts due to meter and billing errors by a utility company. Billing errors include incorrect meter reads, clerical errors, incorrect billing calculations, wrong daily billing factor, sending an estimated bill when the reason for estimation is within the utility's control, and failure to send a bill at all, among other errors. If a residential customer is undercharged due to a billing or meter error, the utility company may bill the customer for the amount of the undercharge for **only up to three months**.

For example, a customer may be undercharged for weeks, months, or even years without their knowledge. Back billing is usually discovered when the customer receives a retroactive bill for a much larger than usual amount of money and is told to pay within a certain amount of time or their service will be shut off.

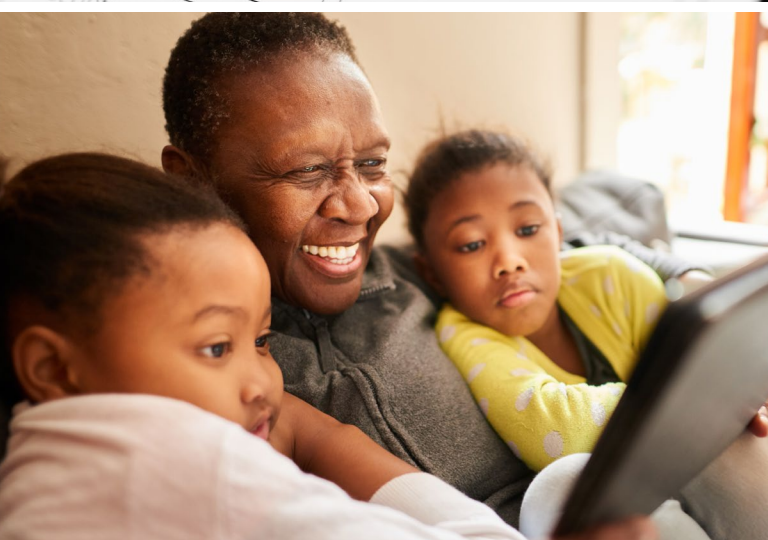
Unfortunately, utilities may not always tell the consumer that they are being back billed. The customer might simply see an unexplained increase on their statement and not understand why. Fortunately, in most instances a back billing complaint can be settled in favor of the customer. How much a customer will have to pay depends on whether the mistake is a "billing error," "meter error" or "unauthorized use." The distinctions are important:

- If a customer is overbilled because of a billing error, the customer will be due a refund for up to three years of overcharges.
- Meter error relates to non-registering or incorrectly registering meters, which can result in a slow meter that undercharges the residential customer. A "fast" meter is also a meter error. In those cases the customer will be due a refund for up to three years of overcharges.
- Unauthorized use may be, for example, an unauthorized connection or reconnection of a meter after it has been turned off by the utility. Using an unauthorized electric meter, letting friends or neighbors use your electrical outlets, or damaging or altering the meter so that it does not read correctly can also be classified as unauthorized connections. If a customer is underbilled because of unauthorized use, the utility may bill the customer for the full period of unauthorized use. The utility may also seek to recover charges for unauthorized use from any person who benefited from that use, whether or not they were the accountholder or customers of record at the premise during the time period at issue.

Medical issues

Homes that include medically vulnerable family members are often at risk for high utility bills. This may be due to the use of medical equipment that requires a lot of energy use, or because of an increased need for heating and/or cooling homes. For example, when families bring home a newborn baby, their energy usage often increases by 33 percent.¹⁴ Medical equipment such as oxygen concentrators, electric wheelchairs and home hemodialysis machines can all increase electricity bills significantly.¹⁵ Seniors and other vulnerable family members may require air conditioning in order to avoid heat stroke during especially hot days. For customers on fixed incomes, energy increases due to required medical equipment use can be catastrophic. These are just some of the ways medical issues can impact energy affordability for California families.





Part III

What Can You Do To Help?

LEARN

- How to help clients keep bills low
- How to resolve utility problems
- To inform clients of their rights

Usually when a person seeks help from an advocate, they have already exhausted all of their options and are running out of time. If you are trying to stop a shutoff, you may have to jump in immediately to help the customer navigate the complaint process and learn about the resources available to them.

This section brings everything together to help you determine if the individual has a viable consumer complaint that can be filed with their utility company and the CPUC or if the customer simply does not understand what has occurred to lead up to their current situation.

How do I respond to shutoff complaints?

A utility company like PG&E, SCE, SoCalGas and SDG&E **can shut off service or send a shutoff notice if a customer:**

- Does not pay their bill
- Does not follow through on payment arrangements
- Makes a payment with a check that has insufficient funds

If the customer has not paid the bill and has received a shutoff notice, review the last few bills with the customer and ask the customer:

- Have they paid late, missed payments, or not paid their bill in full?
- Do they believe they have been overcharged?
- Does their bill include debt or usage from previous billing periods?
- Have they moved recently?
- Is their utility asking them to pay someone else's bill?
- Do they have a Smart Meter? If not, has their bill been estimated? Was their meter read?
- Does someone in their household use medical equipment or have a medical condition that requires additional energy usage?

The complaint process

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) has consumer protections in place to help prevent shutoffs. Informal complaints are a process that should be used when a customer's rights have been violated based on the guidelines and rules set forth by the CPUC. The informal complaint process itself may not start until you have interviewed the person with the complaint. You may also need to document the complaint by asking the customer to show you some of their bills or other documents they have received from their utility company in order to figure out the situation. Once you have received as much information as you can, you can begin the complaint process.

You will first have to:

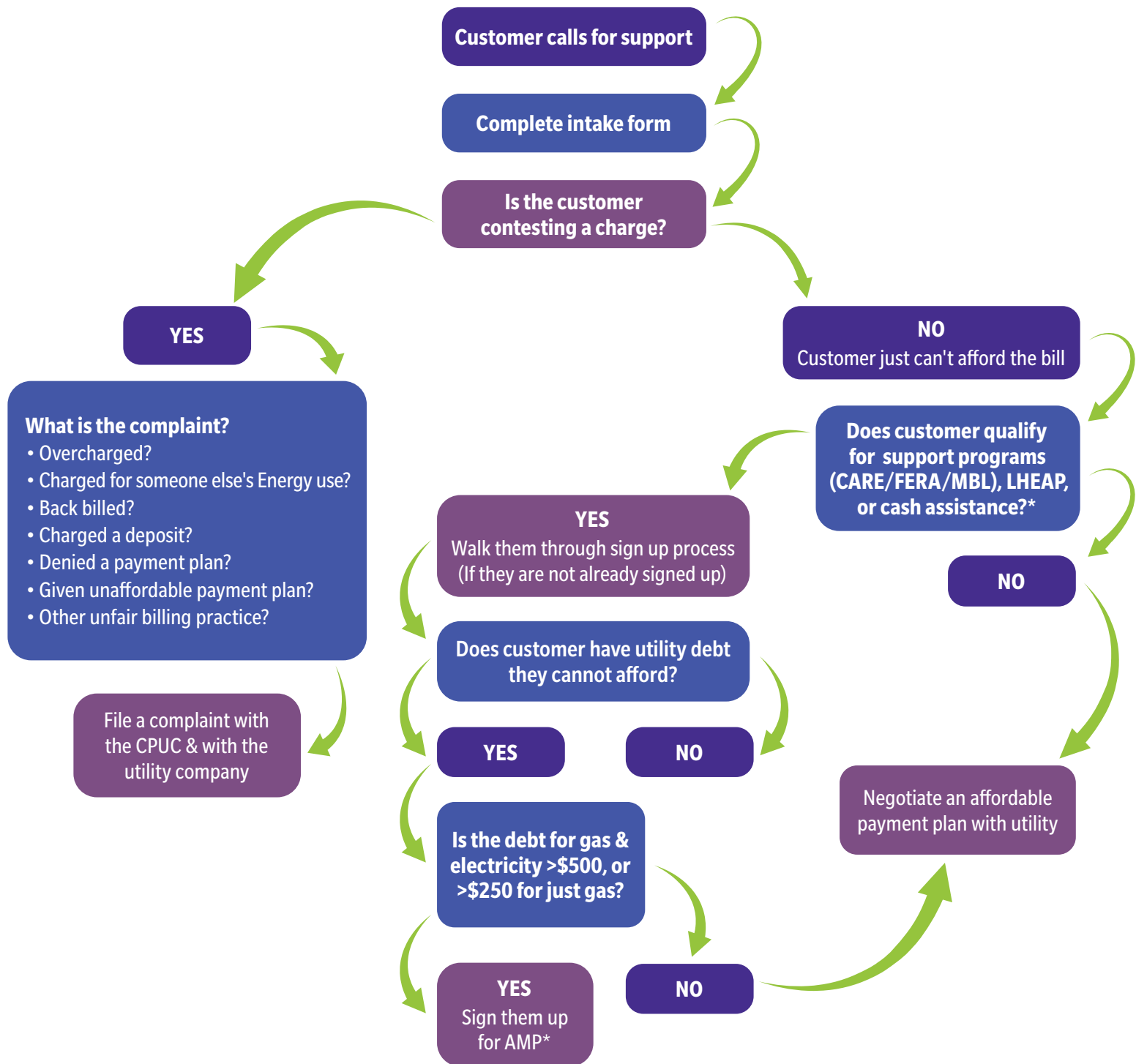
Identify the issue in the complaint. A complaint is when a person comes to you with a specific and identifiable problem. Sometimes when rates increase, the customer struggles to make payments. While the customer may want to complain about this, this situation is not a viable complaint that can be brought to the utility company or CPUC. The advocate

must first determine if the customer simply needs to better understand their bill, needs help identifying financial support strategies, or if there is a situation that can be remedied by the utility company. You can always advise the customer about programs that can help them pay the bill. (See section on Customer Support Programs and Resources)

You can use the [Shutoff Intake Form](#) located on TURN's website to make sure you gather all of the relevant information. Getting copies of the most recent bill will be helpful, but if the situation is a particularly difficult one, you may need to see more bills dating back to when the problem occurred. You can also help the customer set up an online account in order to access the bills so that you can gather the information you will need to identify and resolve the complaint. If you cannot access the bills, you can still call the utility company and the customer service representative can review the consumer's bill with you, especially if the customer is facing a shutoff. However, you will need to fill out the utility authorization form. The utility authorization form can be found on the utilities' websites.



The Complaint Process: A Step-by-Step Guide



* Remember to fill out an authorization form if you need to call the utility company on the customer's behalf!

Complaint Questionnaire

1 ACCOUNT HOLDER INFORMATION

Name, address, telephone number(s),
Account number, utility company

2 STATUS

Is customer currently shut off? Disconnection notice?
Do they qualify for CARE? FERA? Medical Baseline? LIHEAP?

3 AMOUNT OWED

Time period when amount was accumulated?
Unusual or unexplained increases in monthly bill?
Unfair billing practices?

4 WHY IS AMOUNT SO HIGH

Customer only paid what they could?
Customer uses energy for medical purposes?
Customer charged a previous tenant's bill?
Customer charged landlord's bill?
Estimated bill?
Billing error?
Meter or other equipment error?
Inability to pay?

5 DEBT MANAGEMENT AND PAYMENT PLANS

Does customer qualify for AMP?
Do they have an unaffordable payment plan?
Were they denied a payment plan by utility company?

When is it a complaint?

The advocate must interview the customer, review the bills and find out if the customer has a specific and identifiable problem:

- Did the customer try unsuccessfully to negotiate with their utility?
- Was the customer signed up for an unaffordable payment plan?
- Did the utility company deny the customer a payment plan?
- Was the customer dropped from the CARE program due to high usage?
- Was the customer dropped from the CARE program because they did not re-certify?
- Should the customer have been enrolled in CARE or FERA and/or Medical Baseline but the utility company lost or did not receive their application?
- Did the customer find an error in their bill?

When is it not a complaint?

Sometimes a person thinks they have a complaint but the problem is due to a lack of information or understanding. After talking to the person and reviewing the bill you may find:

- There was a recent rate increase, which means that the customer's bills have increased because they are being charged more for electric or gas services.
- Their rate structure changed, for example: from a tiered structure to time-of-use (TOU).
- They lost their CARE discount because they did not re-certify their eligibility.
- They lost their CARE discount because they were using too much energy and were identified by the utility company as a "high user."
- They lost their Medical Baseline because they did not re-certify.
- They thought they had a payment plan because they were paying whatever they could each month.
- They did not understand how to read the bill.

How to dispute a bill

Once you've established that there is a viable complaint, **you can dispute the bill:**



CALL THE UTILITY

- 1) Speak to the supervisor or manager
- 2) Tell them you are disputing the past due amount
- 3) Tell them you want to open a complaint



CONTINUE TO PAY

Pay the current balance due each month until the dispute is resolved



FILE A COMPLAINT WITH THE CPUC

If you cannot resolve the complaint with the utility, file a complaint with the CPUC

Before you call the company on behalf of a customer, you may need to fill out and fax or e-mail an authorization form to the utility company. The form notifies the company that you have permission to speak on the customer's behalf. Copies of the authorization forms can be found on the utility companies' websites.

Next steps:

Call the utility company and try to make an affordable payment arrangement. All customers are entitled to a 12-month payment plan. There is nothing prohibiting customer service representatives from giving customers payment plans longer than 12 months, however, the customer and/or their advocate will have to ask and negotiate payment plans over terms longer than 12 months. If the customer has a good payment history with the utility, use that as leverage. The customer cannot be asked to pay more than 20 percent of their past due bill as the first payment of their payment plan. Finally, make sure that the **customer understands that they need to pay their regular monthly utility bill in addition to the payment arrangement amount.**

Remember! Customers should never agree to a payment plan they cannot afford!

How you can protect the consumer

The utility company **may not shut off** a customer's service **without notifying the customer prior to disconnecting service for non-payment.**

PG&E, Edison, SoCalGas, and SDG&E must send a 15-day notice of termination (which may be combined with the customer's regular bill) followed by a 48-hour notice, **and the utility must attempt to contact the customer by phone or in person at least 24 hours before disconnection.**



KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!

UTILITIES ARE REQUIRED TO:

- ☞ Notify customers before power is shut off
- ☞ Give customers an explanation for the shutoff and give them options to prevent it
- ☞ Refrain from shutting off power for non-payment on Saturdays, Sundays, or legal holidays
- ☞ Refrain from disconnecting Medical Baseline or life support customers without an in-person visit from a utility representative

What should a customer NOT pay?

Some utility customers may not be responsible for a large bill they received from their utility company. Check to see if any of these situations apply to the person you are helping:

- ◆ **They have been back-billed more than 3 months.**
- ◆ **They have been coerced into paying someone else's bill.**
- ◆ **They have been told to pay a deposit.**

If any of these circumstances are present, have the customer contact the utility right away to dispute the bill.

Don't wait for a shutoff notice before contacting the CPUC to dispute a bill

Protect the customer by notifying the utility and the CPUC as soon as possible. If the customer wants to dispute the bill, they should file a complaint with the CPUC's Consumer Affairs Branch and with the utility company.

They may also need to place the amount in dispute in an account with the CPUC in order to keep service on. Any bills received after the complaint is filed (minus disputed amount) must be paid on time.

Avoiding a shutoff during a billing dispute

Failure to follow the proper procedures while disputing a bill can result in a shutoff. If a utility customer says that their bill is incorrect, tell them to review the bill with a customer services representative. Request to speak with a manager or supervisor if necessary. If that fails, have the customer file a complaint with the CPUC immediately. **It is best to call the CPUC at 1.800.649.7570 instead of filing a written complaint.** If the customer files a complaint within 5 days of receiving the disputed bill, the power cannot be shut off until the CPUC has issued a decision and the case has been closed. Even if more than 5 days have passed, however, appealing to the utility and/or the CPUC in an attempt to work something out may buy the customer some time.

Advise the customer NOT to wait for a shutoff notice to contact the CPUC to dispute their bill. The customer should protect themselves by notifying the utility as soon as possible of their intent to dispute their bill and the reasons for doing so.

Make sure the customer understands that any bills they receive after the disputed ones must be paid in full (minus disputed amount) and on time.

How to submit a complaint to the CPUC directly:

FILE ONLINE:

appsssl.cpuc.ca.gov/cpucapplication/

CALL CPUC HOTLINE:

1-800-649-7570

WRITE THE CPUC:

CPUC, Consumer Affairs Branch
505 Van Ness Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94102-3298

Include this information in your complaint:

- 1) Customer Name
- 2) Service Address
- 3) Mailing address
- 4) Name of Utility Company
- 5) Utility Account Number
- 6) Brief Description of the Complaint
- 7) Copies of Any Disputed Bills
- 8) Copies of Any Other Documents

Important rules or policies you need to know

Understanding the tariffs—or rules—can be very useful in helping a customer with a shutoff. Tariffs for PG&E, Edison, SoCal Gas and SDG&E can be found on the company websites. Common rules you will need to know when assisting a person with a shutoff include:

- Application for Service
- Establishment and Reestablishment of Credit
- Rendering and Payment of Bills
- Disputed Bills
- Restoration of Service
- Adjustment of Bills for Billing Error

Go to the following websites and click on Electric or Gas Tariffs at:

Pacific Gas and Electric: pge.com/tariffs

Southern California Edison: sce.com

SoCal Gas: tariff.socalgas.com/regulatory/tariffs/tariffs-rules.shtml

San Diego Gas and Electric:

Gas Rules: regarchive.sdge.com/tm2/ssi/inc_gas_rules.html

Electric Rules: tariff.sdge.com/tm2/ssi/inc_gas_rules.html



Part IV

Customer Support Programs and Resources

LEARN

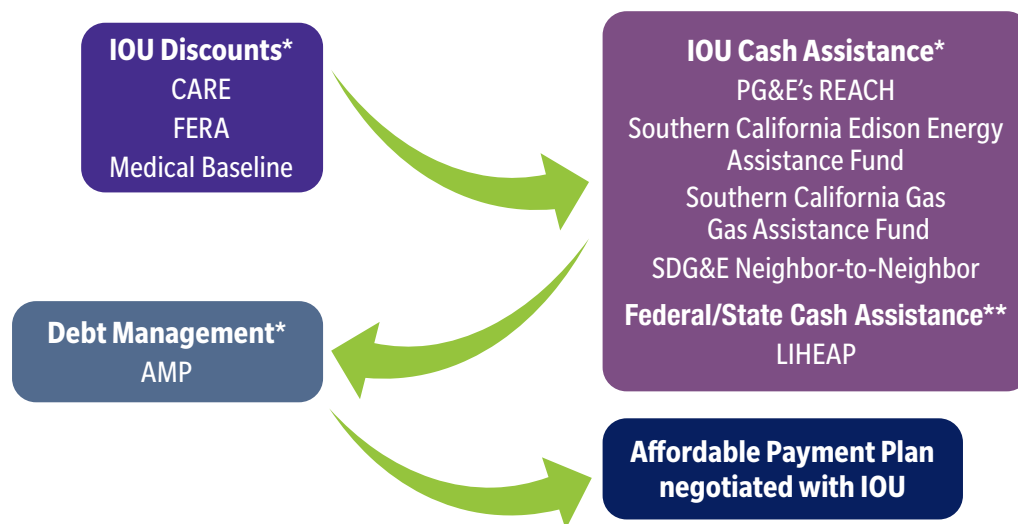
- What support programs are available
- How to help keep the lights on!



Customer support programs and resources

Sometimes the cause of a large bill or utility debt has nothing to do with an unfair billing issue and instead is simply the result of high utility costs and a family's inability to make ends meet. In these cases, customers may not be able to dispute charges or file a viable complaint with the utility company or CPUC. That does not mean they have no recourse. In this section we outline several sources of support for lowering and paying energy bills. There are an array of discount, cash assistance, and other support programs run by the utility companies, as well as programs supported by the state and federal government. All customers are eligible for some type of support.

The flow chart below outlines this broader process of helping customers.



This section provides numerous resources with which to help utility customers avoid shutoffs. These include information about:

- Utility Bill Discounts
- Cash Assistance
- Energy Efficiency and Other Ways To Save Money
- Debt Forgiveness
- Community Support
- Payment Plans

Utility bill discounts

Public Purpose Programs are available for customers who meet certain income limits. Eligible customers may receive discounts on their local phone service, natural gas, electric service, and some water service. Because income limits change every year, it's possible

* Utility programs DO NOT take immigration status into account, nor do they affect the naturalization process.

** Some LIHEAP providers exclude some customers based on immigration status because LIHEAP is federally funded. Some LIHEAP providers have found ways to get around this. Contact your local service provider for more information.

that if a customer did not qualify the previous year, they may qualify this year. Below is a description of the programs available to low-income energy utility customers, as well as Medical Baseline, which is available to any qualifying customer regardless of income.

*NOTE: Immigration status is irrelevant for CARE, FERA and Medical Baseline. These programs are administered by the utility companies. Eligible customers should never be afraid to register for programs administered by utility companies. These programs cannot impact the naturalization process and are not considered as part of the public charge rule. Data about registered customers is never shared with federal agencies. Programs administered by the federal government such as LIHEAP **may include immigration status requirements.***

ALL utility customers who meet the income eligibility requirements qualify for CARE and FERA

CARE - California Alternate Rates for Energy

CARE provides a 20% discount on customers' natural gas bill and a 30-35% discount on their electric bill. This adds up to savings of hundreds of dollars every year. Eligible customers are those whose total household income is at or below the income limits indicated below. Income limits are updated every year in June.

CARE INCOME GUIDELINES*

Household Size	Income Eligibility Upper Limit
1-2	\$34,480
3	\$43,920
4	\$53,000
5	\$62,808
6	\$71,160
7	\$80,240
8	\$89,320
Each Additional Person	\$9,080

* Before taxes and effective through May 31, 2022

For updated income eligibility, go to:

cpuc.ca.gov/industries-and-topics/electrical-energy/electric-costs/care-fera-program

Customers are also eligible for CARE if they are enrolled in public assistance programs such as Medicaid/Medi-Cal; Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC); Healthy Families A & B; National School Lunch's Free Lunch Program (NSL); Food Stamps/CalFresh/SNAP; Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP); Head Start Income Eligible (Tribal Only); Supplemental Security Income (SSI); Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance; and CalWORKs/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Tribal TANF.

Customers can find the CARE application on their utility company's website or call the utility to apply. Customers of Southern California Gas and Southern California Edison must submit separate applications to each utility company.

FERA - The Family Electric Rate Assistance Program

Customers participating in the FERA program receive an 18% discount on their electric charges. Families whose household income slightly exceeds eligibility for the CARE program may qualify to receive FERA discounts.

PG&E, Southern California Edison, and SDG&E have only one application for the CARE and FERA programs. Any customer who applies for CARE is automatically screened for eligibility for FERA.

FERA discounts are only available for households with 3 or more members and the discount is only for electricity, not gas.

The following are the income limits (before taxes). Income limits are updated every year in June.

FERA INCOME GUIDELINES*

Household Size	250% of Federal Poverty Guidelines (FERA)
1-2	Not eligible
3	\$54,900
4	\$66,250
5	\$77,600
6	\$88,950
7	\$100,300
8	\$111,650
Each Additional Person	\$9,080 - \$11,350

* Before taxes and effective through May 31, 2022

For updated income eligibility, go to:

cpuc.ca.gov/industries-and-topics/electrical-energy/electric-costs/care-fera-program



Medical Baseline

The Medical Baseline program helps people who have serious medical conditions and/or medical equipment that increase the costs of their utilities. Customers who qualify for Medical Baseline can get more of their gas and electricity at the lowest—or baseline—rates. This helps reduce energy costs for qualified customers, regardless of their household income.

The Medical Baseline Program provides extra amounts of natural gas and electricity billed at the lowest rate for customers who rely on life support equipment, or those who have life threatening illnesses or compromised immune systems.

"Life support equipment" is equipment that uses mechanical or artificial means to sustain, restore, or supplant a vital function, or mechanical equipment that is relied upon for mobility both within and outside of buildings.

Any customer—or resident in the customer's home—who needs additional cooling or heating in order to avoid deteriorating health qualifies for Medical Baseline.

When a person is on Medical Baseline, on life support, or has self-certified to their utility that they have a serious illness or condition that could become life threatening, their utility company is required to:

- Make an in-person visit a few days before a shutoff is scheduled or at the time of disconnection for non-payment
- Provide customers with additional notice prior to a planned outage (e.g. PSPS – “Public Safety Power Shutoff” or for scheduled equipment maintenance)
- Provide additional natural gas and/or electricity at the lowest rate
- Ensure customers with verified life-threatening illnesses do not have their service shut off and receive additional support.

Medical Baseline is not a means tested program and is available to everyone with a qualifying medical condition regardless of income.



Monthly bill discounts

All customers on a tiered rate plan get a standard “Baseline Allowance” each month (See section on Rate Structures for more information). The Baseline Allowance is a set amount of electricity and natural gas for basic needs that is charged at the lowest rate. Medical Baseline customers get an additional Medical Baseline Allowance of approximately 500 kilowatt-hours of electricity and/or 25 therms of gas at the lowest rate each month. This can help reduce energy costs.

If more than one household member has a qualifying medical condition, the customer

may qualify for more than one Medical Baseline allowance. If the standard Medical Baseline Allowance does not meet the household’s medical needs, customers may ask for an additional Medical Baseline Allowance.

Medical Baseline discounts are in addition to CARE and FERA discounts that households struggling to make ends meet may already receive.

Additional protections from disconnection for non-payment

Customers enrolled in the Medical Baseline program who meet additional qualifications of hardship are entitled to special protections from disconnection. These protections are found in Section 779.3 of the California Public Utilities Code and apply where the customer can’t afford to pay the bill on time and is willing to enter into a 12- month payment plan for the amount past due.

In order to qualify, the customer must also meet one of the following criteria:

1. The customer or a member of the customer’s household is under hospice care at home.
2. The customer or a member of the customer’s household depends upon life-support equipment.
3. The customer or a member of the customer’s household has a life-threatening condition or illness, and a licensed physician, person licensed pursuant to the Osteopathic Initiative Act, a physician assistant, or nurse practitioner certifies that gas or electric service is medically necessary to sustain the life of the person or prevent deterioration of the person’s medical condition.

Who qualifies for Medical Baseline?

Any full-time resident of the home with a qualified medical condition or requiring qualified medical equipment is eligible for this program. Medical Baseline is based on a medical condition and use of medical devices only, not on income. The application must be filled out and signed by the utility account holder. A medical practitioner's certification is required as part of the eligibility process and may be provided by a licensed physician, a person licensed pursuant to the Osteopathic Initiative Act, or a physician assistant, or nurse practitioner. If a family member has a permanent disability certified by their doctor, they will need to self-certify their eligibility every two years. If the disability is not permanent, the family member will have to self-certify each year and will need a doctor's certification every two years.

Qualifying medical devices

A person who uses the following medical devices is eligible for Medical Baseline:

- Aerosol tents
- Apnea monitors
- Hemodialysis machines
- Kidney dialysis machines
- Suction machines
- IPPB machines
- Electrostatic nebulizers
- Ultrasonic nebulizers
- Pressure pumps
- Pressure pads
- Compressors
- Electric nerve stimulators
- Motorized wheelchairs
- Iron lungs
- Respirators
- Oxygen concentrators

Qualifying medical conditions

Customers may also qualify for Medical Baseline if they need permanent space heating or air conditioning due to conditions such as:

- Paraplegia: paralysis of the lower half of the body including both legs
- Quadriplegia: paralysis of both arms and both legs
- Hemiplegia: total or partial paralysis of one side of the body
- Multiple sclerosis: a disease of the nervous system that causes gradual loss of muscle control
- Scleroderma: an autoimmune, rheumatic, and chronic disease that affects the body by hardening connective tissue
- A compromised immune system
- A life-threatening illness

Medical Baseline Allowances are also available for any other condition for which additional heating or cooling is medically necessary to sustain the person's life, or prevent deterioration of the person's health.

Other qualifying conditions

The third criteria for qualifying for Medical Baseline is less specific: Anyone who medically requires additional heating or cooling to sustain their life or prevent deterioration of a medical condition also qualifies for Medical Baseline. This is the most overlooked criteria for qualifying for Medical Baseline because there is no predefined list of conditions that automatically qualify. Medical providers should be reminded of Center for Disease Control guidelines on chronic medical conditions whose treatments require adequate heating or cooling.

- Heart disease
- Mental illness
- Depression
- Insomnia
- Poor Blood Circulation
- Obesity
- Older individuals (65 +)
- Infants and Young Children



Vulnerable customers and third party notification

For households with one or more individuals who have self-certified that they have a serious illness or condition **that could become life threatening** if their electric or gas service is disconnected for non-payment will also receive an in-person visit from a utility representative before disconnection. A representative will post a notice within 48 hours before or at the time of disconnection for non-payment. Customers who wish to self-certify must call their utility for an application.

Vulnerable customers who do not qualify for medical baseline but have special medical needs may register as a vulnerable customer with their utility company.

Utility practices vary with respect to payment options. If the customer is unable to pay the bill and all else fails the utility can disconnect a person. It is important to obtain as much information as possible from the customer in order to make the best intervention plan possible.

Third Party Notification can allow friends and family members to support one another in the case of missed utility bill payments because of illness, hardship or other issues. With Third Party Notification, a designated third party will be notified when the related person

receives a late notice for an unpaid bill. This service can be especially important for elderly customers or customers with impaired capacity who might not respond to notices, even if they have the funds to pay the bill.

The designated third party is not responsible for paying the bill, but this allows friends and relatives to help and support one another. Contact the utility company for more information on how to sign up for this service.

AMP - Arrearage Management Plan

The Arrearage Management Plan, or AMP is a new program launched by the utility companies in 2021. It is an important tool that can help customers get out from under utility debt.

The AMP is a year long (12 month) program. Once a customer signs up, they will have 1/12th of their utility debt forgiven every time they pay a current bill in full and on time.

Example: Let's say a customer named Ana owes \$1,200 in back debt. She called her utility company and they offered her an Arrearage Management Plan. She agreed and registered for the AMP. Now she doesn't have to make payments on her \$1,200 back bill. Every time she pays her current bill in full and on time, her utility company will forgive \$100—or 1/12th—of the \$1,200 she owes them. If she stays current on her bills for 12 months, she will be completely debt free if she pays 10 or more bills on time!



Who qualifies for AMP?

- CARE and FERA customers are eligible for the AMP
- Customer must have had service with the IOU for at least 6 months
- Customer must have made at least one on-time payment in the last 24 months
- Electric customers must owe \$500 or more
- Customers who receive electricity from PG&E, Southern California Edison, or SDG&E must owe at least \$500 to qualify for AMP.
- Gas customers must owe \$250 or more
- Debt must be at least 90 days old

A few more details about AMP

- AMP will forgive a maximum of \$8,000 per customer per 12-month AMP Program
- Any debt beyond \$8,000 can be paid via a payment plan after the 12-month AMP
- If the customer is already on a payment plan, they can switch to the AMP

- Customers can enroll via telephone or on-line
- Customers may miss up to 2 **non-sequential** payments if the customer makes up the missed payment on the next billing due date

Example: A customer named Ana, our hypothetical customer from the example above, registers for AMP in January. She pays her January, February, and March bills in full and on-time. In April she isn't able to pay her bill. As long as she pays her April bill and her May bill by the due date for her May bill, she will be able to stay on the AMP. However, if she is unable to pay her April bill and her May bill, she will be removed from the AMP by her utility company.

There is no impact on the forgiven debt if a customer drops out before the 12 on-time payments.

Example: Ana signed up for AMP in January, she paid her bill in full and on-time in January, February, and March, but she missed April and May. She will still have \$300 (3/12ths, or 1/4th) of her debt forgiven because she made 3 on-time payments before she was removed from the AMP. She can also sign up for a 12-month payment plan to avoid a shutoff even after she has been removed from the AMP.

- If the AMP customer gets LIHEAP assistance, it must be applied to monthly bills, not the arrearage
- AMP participants who drop out of the program may re-enroll after a 12-month waiting period, which begins the month they dropped out of the program as long as they are still eligible
- CARE/FERA customers who complete the program successfully may enroll again after 12 months if they are still eligible
- AMP Customers can request a leveled payment plan. A leveled payment plan charges the customer an average amount each month in order to make the bill more predictable. These plans include a "true up" every 6 months where a customer is either credited for using less energy than they were billed for or they are billed for more energy if they used more than the average.
- If the customer no longer qualifies for CARE sometime during the 12 months they are on AMP, they can stay on the AMP until the end of the 12 months.

Payment plans

Payment plans are an important tool for all utility customers who may be struggling to pay their monthly energy bills. All customers are eligible for a 12-month payment plan. However, if a 12-month payment plan is not affordable for the customer, there is **no rule that says that the utility company cannot give a customer more than 12 months to pay.** You should never allow your client to agree to a payment plan that is not affordable for them.

When asking for a payment plan, keep in mind:

- Payments should be affordable.
- Payment does not include current charges, which also must be paid. It just covers overdue charges.

- Utility company may refuse to speak with an advocate if client is not present.
- A reasonable payment plan should allow a customer to continue receiving service while paying off their outstanding balance.
- The customer cannot be asked to pay more than 20% of their outstanding balance as a down payment for their payment plan.
- If the customer does not make the payments negotiated, the entire amount owed will immediately become due and service may be terminated if not paid.
- Be sure to tell the customer to alert the utility if someone in their household would face serious health or safety risks if the service were disconnected.
- Medical Baseline customers are entitled to a payment plan of at least 12 months. The utility cannot disconnect them for falling behind on bills if they agree to a payment plan.
- Customers must request the payment plan or initiate the request for a payment plan.
- Don't be afraid to ask for a longer term (e.g. 18 months or 24 months) payment plan, especially if that is what the customer can afford.



Make sure the customer is receiving any rate discounts or other assistance they are eligible for; such as CARE or FERA discounts, Medical Baseline allowance and/or other programs. If the customer qualifies for AMP, they should register for this program first. Then, if they are removed from AMP or if the AMP does not forgive all of their debt (i.e. any debt beyond \$8,000), then they can request a payment plan after the AMP.

The utility company can and should propose a payment schedule that takes into account a customer's individual financial situation and payment history.

If the customer has any difficulty reaching an agreement with the utility, contact the CPUC at 1.800.649.7570.

Once a complaint has been filed with the utility company and the CPUC, the CPUC will notify the utility, and the utility will have 10 days to respond. If the customer has already received a shutoff notice call the CPUC in order to get a faster response from the utility. If a written complaint is filed, it could take 4 to 6 weeks to get a response. If a customer has received a shutoff notice, call the CPUC hotline at 800-649-7570. Do not wait to file a complaint online.

The customer should continue to pay their current bills. Filing a complaint with the CPUC does not relieve the customer of the responsibility to pay for current charges on subsequent bills.

If there is a change in circumstances (job loss, illness, etc.), tell the customer to call their utility immediately to see if they can revise their payment plan or ask for an extension on their payment that month. If the utility will not work with them, the customer should file a CPUC complaint.

Utility protections for renters

Public Utilities Code 777 gives residential renters the ability to become customers of a utility corporation if a landlord does not pay the utility bill and/or the property has been foreclosed. It specifies that if one or more of the residential occupants are willing and able to assume responsibility for the subsequent charges to the account to the satisfaction of the utility corporation, the electrical, gas, heat, or water corporation is required to make service available to the residential occupants. The renter can apply for new service and should not be required to pay the landlord's outstanding balance.

Law also requires any notices under this statute to be provided in English, Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Korean.

ESAP – Energy Savings Assistance Program

The Energy Savings Assistance Program (ESAP) provides no-cost weatherization services to low-income households who meet the CARE income guidelines. Services provided include attic insulation, energy efficient refrigerators, energy efficient furnaces, weather stripping, caulking, low-flow showerheads, water heater blankets, door and building envelope repairs that reduce air infiltration, and many others. Services may vary by utility, geographic area, and climate zone.

ESAP INCOME GUIDELINES*

Household Size	Income Eligibility Upper Limit
1-2	\$34,840
3	\$43,920
4	\$53,000
5	\$62,080
6	\$71,160
7	\$78,240
8	\$89,320
Each Additional Person	\$9,080

* Before taxes and effective through May 31, 2022

For updated income eligibility, go to:

cpuc.ca.gov/esap/



Cash assistance: government support and resources for IOU customers

Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP or HEAP)

The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP or HEAP) is a federally funded program that provides financial assistance to eligible households to offset the costs of heating and/or cooling homes. Because the federal government administers it, recipients may be required to provide a Social Security Number. LIHEAP helps keep families safe and healthy through initiatives that assist families with energy costs. They provide federally funded assistance in managing costs associated with:

- Home energy bills
- Energy crises (such as disconnections)
- Weatherization and energy-related minor home repairs

LIHEAP is administered by the California Department of Community Services and Development (CSD). For more information, call **1-866-675-6623**.

To find an office in your community, visit:

csd.ca.gov/Pages/LIHEAPProgram.aspx

The Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) provides free weatherization services to improve the energy efficiency of homes, including attic insulation, weather stripping, minor housing repairs, and related energy conservation measures.

For more information call: **1-866-675-6623**

or visit: csd.ca.gov/Pages/Assistance-HomeEnergyEfficiency.aspx

For income eligibility guidelines:

csd.ca.gov/Pages/DOE-Income-Eligibility.aspx

Each IOU manages an assistance program for their customers. These programs offer financial assistance to their customers in their service territory on a case by case basis.

PG&E REACH Program

The PG&E Relief for Energy Assistance through Community Help (REACH) is a program that helps PG&E customers pay for energy during a crisis. REACH provides an energy credit for up to \$300 based on the past due bill (energy credit support is subject to funding availability). A non-profit organization runs the REACH program from 170 offices in Northern and Central California.

PLEASE NOTE: REACH support is available only once within a 12-month period and customers must qualify for the program.

The following are details on how a customer may be eligible for the program:

- Customer must have a residential account with a utility company in the name of an adult living in the household
- Customer must not have received REACH assistance within the past 12 months
- Customer income must not exceed the REACH income guidelines, which are currently 200 percent above the federal poverty guidelines. The same income guidelines are used for the CARE program. Review those guidelines on the CARE Program page.
- Customer must have received either a 15-day or a 48-hour disconnection notice

NOTE: This is not an all-inclusive list and is subject to periodic modifications. All guidelines are established by the REACH program.

To apply, find an agency in your county to contact or contact the **REACH** program at **1-800-933-9677**.

SDG&E Neighbor-to-Neighbor Fund

The Neighbor-to-Neighbor Fund provides payment support to customers experiencing temporary financial hardship.

To apply, contact **211 San Diego** to be referred directly to participating agencies **by dialing 211**.

211 San Diego is a resource and information hub that connects people with services through a free, 24-hour, 7 days a week phone service and searchable online database.

Or visit:

bit.ly/SDGEbillAssist

utilitybillassistance.com/html/san_diego_gas_and_electric_nei.html

Southern California Edison Energy Assistance Fund

The Energy Assistance Fund (EAF) is SCE's charitable, non-profit organization that offers direct payment assistance to those in need, including seniors on fixed income, young families with children, and veterans.

The Energy Assistance Fund (EAF) is committed to providing critical support to those when they need it most. In partnership with the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, Southern California Edison provides one-time bill payments of up to \$100 during a 12-month period.

To qualify, the SCE bill must be in the recipient's name and the address on the bill must be their primary residence. Customers must also meet certain income guidelines.

Contact a participating community agency to learn more.

Southern California Gas Assistance Fund

If your client is having difficulty paying their gas bill during the winter, the Gas Assistance Fund (GAF) may be able to provide them with a one-time grant for the amount of the gas bill, not to exceed \$100.00.

The Gas Assistance Fund is a joint effort of SoCalGas and United Way of Greater Los Angeles. They work with non-profit partner organizations throughout the SoCal Gas service territory to administer the program.

To qualify for GAF, your client must meet the following requirements:

- The gas bill must be in the name of the applicant requesting assistance.
- The bill address must be the applicant's primary residence.
- The applicant must not apply for more than the maximum GAF allowance for the current program year.
- The applicant must meet the income guidelines that are the same as those for CARE.

For more information about this program, please call:

English: **1-877-238-0092**

Español: **1-800-342-4545**

Other languages: **1-888-427-1345**





Tips to lower your bills

At TURN, we know that weatherization, energy efficiency and conservation are important for the good of the environment and can help customers keep bills manageable. Below are a few tips for conserving energy.

General

- Your water heater is the third highest energy expense in your home. Try turning it down to 120° F.
- A 5° higher setting on your air conditioning thermostat will save about 10% on cooling costs. Set your thermostat between 75° F and 78° F when you are home and 85° F when you are away for more than a few hours.
- Register for your utility company's AC cycling program.
- Turn off everything not in use: lights, TVs, computers. Plug electronics into a power strip or individual adapters that can be switched off so the appliance draws no extra electricity while it is in standby mode. You'll be very surprised at the difference it makes.

Kitchen

- Fill your refrigerator with large water bottles and jugs to keep it full.
- When cooking, keep the lids on pots.
- Vacuum the coils on your refrigerator at least every three months. The dirt build-up makes the refrigerator work harder to keep the contents cool and therefore uses more energy.

Laundry

- Wash clothes in cold water instead of hot. Ninety percent of the energy a washing machine consumes goes to heating the water.
- Make sure your dryer's outside vent is clear and clean the lint filter after every load.
- Put a dry, clean towel in the dryer with each load of wet clothes. The towel will absorb dampness and reduce drying time.
- Use a clothesline.

Sample scripts

When communicating with a utility company, it is important to highlight the most relevant information that will help resolve the complaint. You may also need to fill out an authorization form which lets the utility company know that you have the customer's permission to advocate on their behalf. Below is a sample script you can use for communicating with the utility company by phone or email.

Sample script: shutoff and request for a new payment plan

Name of customer who is the Account Holder
Account Number
Address
Phone Number

We have a PG&E customer who lives in Butte County, Mr. Bill Smith. Mr. Smith had a heart attack in January and has been unable to work since then. He is getting ready to go back to work and has been unable to make payments on his PG&E bill. In late April, early May, he tried to make payment arrangements but was forced to set up a payment plan that he could not afford. When he could not make his first payment, he was shut off.

He now owes \$1,100. He has gone to REACH, Catholic Charities and LIHEAP and was told there were no funds. He also has a six year-old who has recently undergone open-heart surgery and needs access to electricity for his oxygen tank. The family was on CARE and applied for Medical Baseline over a month ago. (They have still not heard back.)

Is there any way possible that his electricity can be restored and the family be put on a 12-month payment plan? The monthly bill ranges from \$150 to \$170. Mr. Smith can afford to pay \$75 plus his monthly bill.



Sample script: shutoff due to a back billing error

Name of customer who is the Account Holder

Account Number

Address

Phone Number

I have been working with a consumer who is being back-billed in the amount of \$1,933.50. She has been trying to work with PG&E to resolve this issue for the past month and so far has not been able to reach a resolution. In fact, she has received a shut off notice for today.

The Smith family had a Smart Meter installed sometime in March. The monthly bills started to fluctuate from low to high. They had monthly bills of about \$12, then \$32, and a high in June of \$161.64. All were paid on time. When they received the first big bill they spoke to a PG&E Customer Service representative and were told that the problem was not an error in billing but that PG&E was “just getting around to billing them for electricity.” Ms. Smith is disputing this bill because she is clearly being back-billed due to a PG&E billing error (undercharge). After reviewing the bill and speaking to Ms. Smith, it does indeed look like she was undercharged due to a billing error after the new meter was installed.

It would appear that PG&E is in non-compliance with Electric Rule No 17.1: Adjustment of Bills for Billing Error, Billing Errors Resulting in Undercharges to the Customer, Residential Service. This rule states “If a residential service is found to have been undercharged due to a billing error, PG&E may bill the Customer for the amount of the undercharge for a period of three months.” Ms. Smith has no problem paying the electricity charges for the last three months.

Can someone please call Ms. Smith and stop the shutoff scheduled for today?

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