

Utilities

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Utility companies must generally notify you in writing before shutting off a utility service to give you time to work out a payment plan or get help paying your bills. Shut offs are illegal in some situations, like certain heat alert days and medical emergencies. Read this to learn more about utility shut off and billing issues.

1. Types of utility companies

If you have a billing issue with your utility company or your utility is shut off, you have different options depending on the type of company that provides your service.

There are different laws that govern “public” utilities and privately owned utilities.

Public utilities

Public utilities include Public Utility Districts (PUD) (<https://www.wpuda.org/about-puds>)(<https://www.wpuda.org/about-puds>) run by elected commissioners in many counties (<https://www.wpuda.org/about-puds>) across Washington.

Public utilities also include municipally owned utilities, like Seattle City Light (<https://www.seattle.gov/city-light>), Seattle Public Utilities, (<https://www.seattle.gov/utilities>) and Tacoma Public Utilities (<https://www.mytpu.org/>).

Private utilities

Private utilities include for-profit companies like Puget Sound Energy (<https://www.pse.com/en>), NW Natural (<https://www.nwnatural.com/>), Pacific Power (<https://www.pacificpower.net/>), Avista Utilities (<https://www.myavista.com/>), and Cascade Natural Gas (<https://www.cngc.com/>) and are regulated by the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC) (<https://www.utc.wa.gov/>).

Rural Electric Cooperatives are also private companies, owned by the members they serve. Examples are Inland Power and Light (<https://www.inlandpower.com/>), Lakeview Light & Power (<https://www.lakeviewlight.com/>), and the Peninsula Light Company (<https://www.penlight.org/>).

2. Shut offs

In most cases, utility companies are supposed to give you written notice before shutting off your utilities service.

Municipally owned utilities are required to give 7 days notice under RCW 35.21.217(5)(a) (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=35.21.217>).

Private utilities may shut off (disconnect) utility service for reasons listed in Washington's Administrative Code (WAC), including unpaid bills. Separate regulations govern the reasons a private utility may shut off service, and the kind of written notice the company must give you before shutting off service:

Electricity WAC 480-100-128
(<https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=480-100-128>)

Gas WAC 480-90-128 (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=480-90-128>)

Water 480-110-355 (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=480-110-355>)

The written notice should have contact information on it about how to dispute the service shut off, resolve billing issues, or let them know if you have a medical emergency.

Medical emergencies

If you have a medical condition or emergency that requires utility service, you can delay a shut off for 5 days. Private utilities are required to delay shut offs and reinstate service that has been already shut off if you notify the company of a medical condition that requires utility service.

You may arrange for a payment plan during the 5 days. You may be able to delay the shut off for more time, but the utility company may ask you for a statement from your medical provider. The regulations about this are found at WAC 480-100-128(8) (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=480-100-128>) (electricity), WAC 480-90-128(8) (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=480-90-128>) (gas), and 480-110-355 (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=480-110-355>)(2) (water).

Winter shut offs

Companies cannot shut off utility service between November 15 and March 15 for eligible people who notify the company about their low income. The company may require you to enter into a payment plan and / or apply for help paying bills through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) (<https://www.commerce.wa.gov/community-opportunities/liheap/>).

These winter low-income payment programs are required under RCW 80.28.010(4) (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=80.28.010>) for public utilities, RCW 35.21.300(2) (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=35.21&full=true#35.21.305>) for municipally owned utilities. Private utilities must offer this winter low-income payment program under WAC 480-100-143 (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=480-100-143>).

Can my landlord shut off my utilities?

Your landlord cannot shut off utilities because you are behind in rent or to make you move.

Under state law at RCW 59.18.300

(<https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=59.18.300>)

(<https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=59.18.300>), it is unlawful for a landlord to intentionally (on purpose) shut off utility service. This includes water, hot water, heat, electricity, or gas.

However, landlords may shut off utilities temporarily if necessary to make repairs. For example, they may shut off the water temporarily to fix a leaky pipe or broken toilet.

Learn more about illegal utility shut offs by landlords.

3. Heat alert days

Residential electric and water service cannot be shut off if the National Weather Service issues a heat related alert where you live. You may ask to have your electricity or water service turned back during a heat alert day if it was already shut off.

Heat related alerts include excessive heat warnings, heat watches, and heat advisories.

This prohibition applies to public utilities under RCW 54.16.285(5)

(<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=54.16.285>) and private utilities under RCW 80.28.010(8)-(9)

(<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=80.28.010>).

Your utility company should give you information about how to ask for your electricity or water to be turned back on or not be shut off. The information may be included in your last bill, or shut off notice.

If your services were turned off because you owed money to the utility company, the utility may ask you to start a payment plan to have the service turned back on. The payments for the plan can't be more than 6% of your monthly income unless you want to pay more.

Residential landlords also must not shut off electricity or water during heat alert days. RCW 59.18.060(11)

(<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=59.18.060>).

Mobile / Manufactured home park owners also must not shut off electricity or water during heat alert days. RCW 59.20.070(7)

(<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=59.20.070>).

4. Help paying bills

If you have a low income, you can ask your utility provider for “budget billing” or an “equal payment plan” so your bill will be lower and consistent each month.

Public gas and electricity utilities must offer budget billing or equal payment plans under RCW 80.28.010(7)

(<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=80.28.010>) and RCW 35.21.300(4) (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=35.21.300>) for municipally owned utilities.

Private utilities must also offer budget billing under WAC 480-90.138 (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=480-90-138>), but they may refuse if you are more than 2 months behind on your bill. Some private utilities offer energy assistance programs (<https://www.utc.wa.gov/consumers/energy/energy-assistance-programs>) to help people pay their bills.

Washington's Department of Commerce also provides eligible people with low incomes help paying utility bills and help repair unsafe or non-working heating and cooling units through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) (<https://www.commerce.wa.gov/community-opportunities/liheap/>).

Washington's Department of Social and Health Service has emergency cash assistance programs for eligible people with low incomes.

Some non-profit organizations offer help with utilities including community action partnerships (<https://wapartnership.org/services/energy-assistance-and-weatherization>) and others listed on Washington 211 (<https://wa211.org/>).

WashingtonLawHelp.org gives general information. It is not legal advice. Find organizations that provide free legal help on our Get legal help page.