

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How can the Idaho PUC help me?

The Idaho Public Utilities Commission regulates investor-owned utilities operating within the state. The Consumer Assistance Staff helps utility customers understand their rights and responsibilities. The Staff can help customers negotiate payment arrangements with regulated utilities.

Does the PUC provide financial assistance?

No, the PUC does not provide financial assistance to those unable to pay their utility bills.

Where can I go for help in paying my utility bills?

The Commission has developed a list of resources to aid customers who need financial assistance or are looking for ways to reduce their energy consumption. Some of the organizations offer monetary assistance for winter heating. The list is not all-inclusive, but represents our best effort to identify organizations that provide assistance to Idaho consumers. (See Energy Assistance Resources)

What other types of assistance are available?

Some organizations offer assistance other than money, such as weatherization services. These organizations are included in the list of resources developed by the Commission. (See Energy Assistance Resources)

What is LIHEAP (“Energy Assistance”)?

The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which is often referred to as “Energy Assistance”, helps eligible households with home heating costs in Idaho. Low-income households may apply for LIHEAP funds at the Community Action Agencies in most larger communities in Idaho. The Nez Perce Tribe, Coeur d’Alene Tribe and the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes offer financial assistance to tribal members.

Who administers LIHEAP?

The Department of Health and Welfare, through the Bureau of Policy, Grants Unit, sponsors the Low Income Home Energy Assistance and Weatherization Programs in Idaho. The Grants Unit subcontracts the grant funds with six community action agencies, the Canyon County Organization on Aging and the Idaho Migrant Council to provide weatherization, energy assistance and community services block grant services to low income participants in Idaho. The Nez Perce Tribe, Coeur d’Alene Tribe and the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes also administer LIHEAP funds available to tribal members.

Can LIHEAP funds help pay my home heating bill?

Yes. A one-time yearly benefit is issued to eligible recipients to help with payment for a primary source of heat in a home. Heating sources may include electricity, gas, coal, wood, propane and oil. The organization issues payment directly to the natural gas and electric utilities. For other fuels, payment is made directly to the applicant. (See Energy Assistance Resources)

When can I apply for LIHEAP, weatherization or heating system repairs?

Applications for LIHEAP are accepted by administering organizations beginning November 1, 2005 through March 31, 2006, although the ending date may be extended. Applications for weatherization and heating system repairs are accepted throughout the year.

How do I qualify for LIHEAP or weatherization benefits?

Applicants for energy assistance or weatherization benefits must meet income guidelines that include all sources of available income for the previous three months. All information obtained from applicants is considered confidential. After the application process is completed, agency personnel will inform applicants of their eligibility for assistance. (See Income Poverty Guidelines)

How much money can I expect to receive from Energy Assistance (LIHEAP)?

The actual benefit amount depends on many different factors such as the number of family members, the source of home heating (gas, electricity or wood), and the location of the home. For benefit year 2005 - 2006, the minimum benefit amount is \$98 and the maximum is \$442. Typically, applicants in the coldest areas of the state who have the highest heating bills receive the highest benefits. Households with a target member, i.e., elderly, disabled, small child, or more than (1) LIHEAP household member, will receive a "bonus" in addition to the base amount above.

Where do I apply for Energy Assistance?

Applications are taken by local Community Action Agencies. The Nez Perce Tribe and the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes take applications for tribal members. Applicants who previously received benefits last winter do not automatically receive benefits this winter. A new application must be submitted each year. An appointment must be scheduled to make the application. An applicant may get information by dialing 2-1-1 I (Idaho Careline). (See Energy Assistance Resources)

Can I get emergency help if I don't have heat or have received a disconnection notice?

Priority is given to emergency applications at the Community Action Agencies. The agencies work with vendors to expedite fuel delivery. An emergency exists if the household has less than 48 hours of bulk fuel (heating oil, propane, wood) to burn, utility service is about to be disconnected or has already been disconnected.

Are there other programs and organizations that can help me?

In addition to LIHEAP, utilities sponsor energy assistance programs. **PROJECT SHARE** (northern and southwestern Idaho) and **PROJECT WARMTH** (southeast Idaho) offer financial assistance for residential energy emergencies and are considered energy blind. The programs also help with energy-related equipment repairs. The utilities collect contributions from employees, customers and shareholders to fund the programs. The programs are supported by other utilities and donations also are made directly to the Salvation Army or American Red Cross. Interested applicants need to contact a Salvation Army Corps office, the local American Red Cross office (southeast Idaho) or a local Project Share representative. Utah Power and Light sponsors its own assistance program, **LEND-A-HAND**, available only to customers of the Company. The money for the fund comes from customer and company donations. The program is administered by the Eastern Idaho Special Services Agency (EISSA) in Idaho Falls and the Southeastern Idaho Community Action Agency (SEICAA) in Pocatello.

County welfare benefits are available if necessary to provide assistance for utility bills. The county will accept applications for help with utility bills, medical needs, and other basic living needs. Recipients may be asked to repay all or part of their assistance within a designated time or contribute a share of their own monies toward the financial request for aid.

(See Energy Assistance Resources)

Where can I get help with repairing my home?

Rural Housing Repair and Rehabilitation, a division of the United States Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, formerly known as Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), provides loans in rural areas to finance repairs on homes, including manufactured homes. Home repair loans are offered to families with very low incomes. Evidence of home ownership is required.

How can I use a Rural Housing Repair and Rehabilitation loan?

The loan funds can be used for the following needs:

1. Installation or repair of sanitary water and waste disposal systems
2. Connection fees for utility hookups
3. Insulation, storm windows and doors
4. Roof repair or replacement
5. Replacement of deteriorated siding
6. Repair or replacement of heating systems
7. Upgrade of electrical wiring
8. Repair or remodel of homes to make them more easily accessible and usable for elderly or handicapped persons
9. Repair of mobile/manufactured homes to remove any health and safety hazards. The mobile/manufactured home must be on a permanent foundation

Where can I get more information about Rural Housing Repair and Rehabilitation loans?

Applicants can go to their local county office of Rural Development for further information. The office address can be found in the local telephone directory under “U.S. Government – Agriculture” or write directly to the:

USDA Office of Rural Development
9173 W. Barnes Dr., Suite A-1
Boise, ID 83709
208-378-5630

The website for the Boise office is at www.rurdev.usda.gov/id/

What is the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)?

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), sometimes called the Earned Income Credit (EIC), is a refundable Federal Income tax credit for low-income working individuals and families. The credit reduces the amount of Federal tax owed and may result in a refund check. If the EITC exceeds the amount of taxes owed, it results in a tax refund to those who claim and qualify for the credit.

Can the EITC refund I receive be used to pay my utility bill?

It is up to you to decide what to do with your refund. Utility customers sometimes use EITC refunds to pay gas or electric bills that accumulated during the heating season. However, utilities are not obligated to wait for payment or delay a scheduled disconnection of service until a customer receives a tax refund.

How do I qualify for EITC?

Income and family size determine the amount of the EITC. The EITC Eligibility Checklist, located on the last page of IRS' Publication 596, Earned Income Credit, may be used to quickly determine eligibility for the credit.

Where can I get more information about EITC?

For more information concerning the EITC, consult the following links:

EITC Overview: <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=96406,00.html>

Earned Income Credit: <http://www.irs.gov/publications/p596/index.html>

Frequently Asked Questions: <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=96466,00.html>

Publication 596: <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p596.pdf>