

When money is short, paying winter heating bills can be a major problem. Sometimes a family's income just won't stretch to cover all the expenses. Unemployment, disability, or illness can cause financial hardships. There are organizations in your community that can help you. They provide such services as budget counseling and weatherization as well as cash assistance.

I'm having trouble paying my winter heating bills. What should I do?

Contact the utility and try to make payment arrangements. Regulated gas and electric utilities are required to make arrangements with you if you can't pay your bill in full. You may even qualify for a special Winter Payment Plan. Cooperative and city-owned utilities are not regulated by the Idaho Public Utilities Commission (IPUC) and may not offer special payment plans.

What is a Winter Payment Plan?

A Winter Payment Plan allows you to pay less than the full amount of your bill during the winter months (November through March). In the spring, you can make arrangements with the utility to pay off the balance owing that accumulated over the winter. This plan is especially helpful for customers who are seasonally-employed or expect more income in the spring.

Who qualifies?

You qualify for a Winter Payment Plan if all of the following are true:

- * You are a residential gas or electric customer of a regulated utility.
- * You are unable to pay in full for utility service.
- * Your household includes anyone who is very sick, 62 years old or older, 18 years old or younger (does not include emancipated minors).

What if I have a large unpaid bill?

The utility will add the past due amount to its estimate of how much you will owe for service over the next twelve months. That total is divided into 12 monthly payments and that monthly payment in turn is divided in half to determine the winter payment plan amount.

If you participate in the Winter Payment Plan one year, you may participate the next year if you've honored the arrangement, and as of November 1, you owe no more than \$75 or your utility bill for the previous 30 days, whichever is greater. You may have to pay off part of the balance you owe to qualify for the following year's Winter Payment Plan.

How much will I have to pay each month?

- * Less than your actual monthly bill.
- * The payment is equal to one-half of the normal monthly level payment amount.
- * Your utility can tell you exactly what your monthly payment will be.

What advantage is there to going on a Winter Payment Plan?

If you sign up and make your required payments under a Winter Payment Plan

- ✱ Your utility service will not be shut off during the winter moratorium months.
- ✱ You will establish a good payment record with the utility.
- ✱ You will be better able to set up future payment arrangements.

If you don't pay anything during the winter, the utility will ask for full payment in the spring and will be less likely to allow you to make long-term payment arrangements. You also risk having your service shut-off.

What if I don't make my minimum monthly payments?

You will be taken off the Winter Payment Plan if you don't make your required payments. However, utilities can't shut off gas or electricity service during the months of December, January, or February if you are unable to pay AND have children, elderly, or very sick people in your household. Utilities can shut off service in November and March.

What happens when the Plan ends?

The amount you pay under a Winter Payment Plan covers only a part of what you owe for the gas or electricity you use. You will need to make new payment arrangements with the utility before April. The utility can put you on a regular Level Payment Plan, set up a short-term payment plan to allow you to "catch up" during the summer, or put together some other type of payment schedule.

When can I sign up for a Winter Payment Plan?

The period covered by the plan is November 1st through March 31st. You may sign up for a Winter Payment Plan any time during the fall or winter, but to take full advantage of the plan, you should sign up to begin November 1st.

How can I sign up for a Winter Payment Plan?

Call your gas or electric utility to set up a plan. The utility will tell you what your monthly payment amount will be. You must do this every year you want to participate in the plan.

What happens if I move in December, January or February?

If the same utility serves the new residence, the utility will continue to provide service to a customer on a Winter Payment Plan or a customer that notified the utility prior to the move that he or she couldn't pay the bill in full and had a permanent household member that was over 62 years old, under 18 years old or was very sick. If there is no service at the new residence, the utility will connect service regardless of any outstanding balance on the customer's bill. You must connect service at the new address within 30 days after disconnecting at the old address.

Questions?

If you have more questions about the Winter Payment Plan, contact your gas or electricity utility or call the IPUC at 1.800.432.0369 or 208.334.0369. You can also visit the IPUC online at www.puc.idaho.com.



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