

Partnering with Families to Build Economic Security During Emergencies



Partnering with Families to Access Utilities Assistance During Emergencies

The information in this tip sheet was current as of August 1, 2020.

Families may have trouble paying for utilities during emergencies and natural disasters. These utilities can include heating, cooling, cell phone, and internet services. Early care and education professionals can partner with families to:

- Access energy assistance
- Access cell phone and internet service assistance
- Track progress and celebrate successes

1. Access Energy Assistance

Families may struggle to pay electric, gas, heating oil, and water bills during an emergency or natural disaster.

- **Contact utility company.** Let families know that, as a rule of thumb, the best thing to do when they can't pay their bills is to call the utility company and open a line of communication.
 - Families can call and explain their situation and see what kind of arrangements can be made with the company.
 - Remind families to keep a written record that they called and explained their hardship. Have them record the day and time of their call, as well as the name of the customer service representative they spoke with.

- Families can also check with their local government to see if a state of emergency has been declared for their community and if service shutoffs are temporarily suspended.
- **New funding.** Recent federal legislation provides \$900 million in additional funds to the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).
 - The funding is intended to help prevent, prepare for, and respond to home energy needs during the current national health emergency.
 - You can help families contact their state or Tribe's Low-Income Energy Office to determine their eligibility and apply for energy assistance. Visit the LIHEAP website to learn more.
- **National Energy Assistance Referral (NEAR).** If families need help finding their local Low-Income Energy Office, they can call the National Energy Assistance Referral (NEAR) toll free at 1-866-674-6327 or TTY 1-866-367-6228.
 - They can also visit the NEAR website or email NEAR at energyassistance@ncat.org. Remind families to include their city, county, and state in their email message.
 - NEAR is a free service for people who want information on where to apply for LIHEAP. This program may pay a portion of the energy bills of eligible families and individuals with low incomes.
- **Ineligible for LIHEAP.** If a family's income is too high to qualify for LIHEAP but they need help paying energy bills, the family can contact the following:
 - Local social services agencies or nonprofit organizations that may have funds to help
 - Their local gas, oil, or electric company to ask about budget billing programs or new payment options, especially for customers with disabilities who are on Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

2. Access Phone and Internet Service Assistance

Cell phones, landlines, and internet access are critical services during emergencies and natural disasters. They are necessary for communicating and accessing information when face-to-face interactions are limited.

- **Contact the service provider.** Encourage families to reach out to their landline phone, cell phone, or internet service company if they are worried about paying their bill.
 - They can check to see what kind of arrangements can be made with the company, such as setting up a payment plan.
 - Families also can ask if the company has decided to waive late fees and/or not suspend a customer's service during the emergency.

- **Access financial assistance.** If families don't have access to the internet or if they need assistance paying for their landline or cell phone service, you can connect them to Lifeline.
 - Lifeline is a federal program that helps make communications services more affordable for consumers with low incomes.
 - Lifeline gives subscribers a discount on monthly telephone service, broadband internet service, or voice-broadband bundled services purchased from participating companies.

3. Track Progress and Celebrate Successes

Follow up with families to see if they are able to access the utilities assistance they may need. Celebrate their successes!



Staff Tip

You may find you need utility assistance during an emergency. Use the information in this tip sheet to address any needs you may have related to accessing utility assistance.

Check out the other staff tip sheets in the *Partnering with Families to Build Economic Security During Emergencies* series. Review and share the family tip sheets in this series with families. These tip sheets include valuable information families can use to improve their family economic security during emergencies.

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