

# UTILITY RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS FOR TENANTS

## HAS YOUR LANDLORD SHUT OFF YOUR UTILITIES?

**If the utility bill is in your landlord's name and they stopped paying the bill,** you have the right to keep your service on by paying the current charges every month.

- If your service is already off and you did not receive a 30-day notice, call the utility company and tell them that you are a tenant at the residence and that the landlord is responsible for paying the bill. The utility should restore your service within 24 hours and provide you with proper notice about the shut-off.
- You can keep your service on by paying the last 30 days of charges.
- You do not need to put service in your name. However, you may choose to depending on your specific circumstances – and especially if doing so would get you access to utility assistance programs and grants to help pay for service.

- You will not be held responsible for the debt under the landlord's name – only the monthly bills going forward, which you may deduct from your rent each month. Make sure you keep receipts! If you live in a multi-family building and there is only one bill for the entire building, you will need to organize with the other tenants to make the monthly payments in full.
- If the landlord tries to retaliate/evict you for paying the utility bill and deducting it from your rent, you have the right to file a countersuit for two months' rent payments or actual damages (whichever is greater), the costs of filing a lawsuit, and reasonable attorney's fees.
  - [Contact your local legal aid office](#) as soon as possible if the landlord threatens to evict you or you get an eviction notice/notice to quit.

**If the utility bill is in your name,** you should call your utility company right away and let them know that you are a tenant living at the residence.

- The utility company cannot turn off your service at the request of the landlord without verifying that you agreed to the shut off or that the property is vacant.
- If you were already shut off without proper notice, the utility should turn your service back on within 24 hours.

No matter whose name the bill is in, if your landlord turns off service by physically turning off a water valve or removing, blocking, or damaging a breaker or meter, you should call your local legal aid office right away. **It is illegal to try to evict a tenant by turning off utility service.**

If you believe you are paying for service in shared common areas in an apartment building (like a lobby or floor hallway) or another residence, that's called a **foreign load**. Foreign load protections apply to PUC-regulated utility companies only (most large electric and gas companies and some water companies).

- You can call the utility company and request a foreign load investigation. They will send someone out to check the meters and/or breakers.
- If you have been paying for service that you shouldn't have been charged for, the utility company will put the account (and any current debts on the account) in the landlord's name until the issue is fixed.
- You will only be responsible for charges after the issue is fixed.
- Your landlord cannot retaliate/evict you for reporting a foreign load. If your landlord retaliates or tries to evict you because you reported foreign load, [reach out to your local legal aid office](#) right away.

**Pennsylvania Utility Law Project**  
**118 Locust Street**  
**Harrisburg, PA 17101**

Are you facing a utility shutoff?  
Pennsylvania residents may be eligible for free help.

Search for your local legal aid program:  
<https://palegalaid.net/legal-aid-providers-in-pa>

Or, call our toll-free hotline at  
[1-844-645-2500](tel:1-844-645-2500)  
or email us at  
[utilityhotline@pautilitylawproject.org](mailto:utilityhotline@pautilitylawproject.org)



## **References**

- Discontinuance of Service to Leased Premises 66 Pa. C.S. 1521
- Utility Service Tenants Rights Act (USTRA), 68 P.S. 399.1
- Some local ordinances also include Utility Rights and Protections for Tenants. [Contact your local legal aid office](#) if you lease a property and have trouble establishing utility service due to a previous resident's debt at the address.