

Utility shutoffs threaten a fresh crisis for low-income and Black families as Covid surges again

By [Chandelis Duster](#), CNN

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advocacy groups are warning that low-income families could face utility shutoffs as moratoriums on disconnections lift -- with Black families especially at risk.

In [Kansas](#), [Colorado](#), [Mississippi](#), and [Iowa](#), state-mandated emergency bans on disconnections have been lifted. And some states -- including hotspots Georgia, Alabama and Florida -- never imposed governor-mandated moratoria on shutoffs, leaving public utility commissions, municipalities, small companies and rural cooperatives to decide whether to suspend or enforce disconnection policies.

A [list](#) by the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners detailing state responses to the pandemic shows statewide freezes on disconnections by gas, electricity and water providers, remain in some states, including California, Maryland, Michigan, Virginia, Alaska, Hawaii and Washington, DC. Some utility and energy companies across the country have voluntarily suspended disconnections on their own.

But rising concern over shutoffs comes with millions of Americans [unemployed](#) -- and the expiration of a generous federal unemployment benefit looming at the end of July, even as the resurgence of infections is hampering efforts to return more people to work.

Disconnections a form of 'systemic environmental injustice' in Georgia

In Georgia, which has an [upward trend](#) in average new daily cases of coronavirus, at least 26 electric, gas and water service providers have resumed disconnections for nonpayment during the pandemic, according to a CNN count. The companies serve hundreds of thousands of customers.

Georgia Power, which has more than 2.5 million customers, [said](#) it will resume disconnections July 15.

One Georgia-based advocacy group, the [New Georgia Project Black + Green Agenda](#), said shutoffs disproportionately impact communities of color.

"The disconnection of Black, Brown and poor residents' utilities in the state of Georgia is a form of systemic environmental injustice," said Valerie Hill Rawls, director of the initiative, which was formed earlier this year to educate Blacks in rural counties and those living in the "Black Belt" region of the state about environmental injustice and coronavirus. "This will have a devastating effect on those who have been impacted the hardest by Covid-19, loss of wages and now the potential loss of access to gas and electricity," Rawls said.

She is also concerned sweltering heat in the summer months, and the increased need for additional cooling, water and medical equipment respiratory illnesses, could exacerbate the issue of utility disconnections even further.

"So it won't just be the day-to-day need to turn on your lights or your stove for food for cooking, it's actually going to drill down to basic health concerns from the heat that's upon us," Rawls said.

The Black + Green Agenda is one of at least 30 groups in the state that [sent a letter](#) to the Georgia Public Service Commission with concerns over its decision to allow shut offs to resume.

'Unpaid utilities bills ultimately will result in higher rates for all customers'

The Georgia Public Service Commission, which imposed a moratorium on shutoffs by natural gas providers and Georgia Power, lifted the moratorium last month and does not regulate water providers. Georgia remains under a governor-

mandated [public health state of emergency](#) through August 11.

Providers are prohibited from disconnecting those who have "a serious illness which would be aggravated by said discontinuance" -- including Covid-19 infections or complications.

The commission also prohibits utility providers it regulates from disconnecting utility services between November 15 and March 15 as long as customers agree to pay the unpaid balance. The commission also prohibits disconnections for customers on any day a heat advisory and excessive heat warning is in effect by the National Weather Service prior to 8 a.m. ET.



statement.

Asked about utility providers resuming disconnections during the pandemic, Krause defended the move, saying that once the moratorium was lifted "the economy was re-opened and most people resumed work."

"Ending the moratorium helps to ensure customers do not fall further behind on their bills, which would create an even more difficult situation for many," Krause wrote CNN in a statement.

He added that "unpaid utilities bills ultimately will result in higher rates for all customers" and referred those with trouble making payments to federal programs as well as the Salvation Army for assistance.

Prior to the pandemic, keeping the lights on and having running water has been a struggle for many Americans who were already living paycheck to paycheck, experts say.

And while there are federal programs and community organizations that offer financial assistance to struggling families, it may not be enough during the pandemic.

According to a 2018 [study](#) by the National Energy Assistance Directors' Association, 34% of Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program grant recipients said they received disconnect notices and 15% had their electricity or gas shut off due to nonpayment.

Mark Wolfe, executive director of NEADA, told CNN based on the data the organization has collected so far, up to 6% of American households could be put at risk of shut-offs, adding "if Congress does not extend unemployment, it could be a catastrophe for many Americans" regarding utilities, food and rent.

"We're estimating that there were about 28 million households eligible for energy assistance before Covid-19 hit, we're thinking it's about 20% higher...the number of people that are low income with very limited resources is quite large right now," he said.

A 2017 [report](#) by the NAACP found that utility shutoffs had a disproportionate impact on poor and Black communities. In the report, the organization also said lower income communities spend the majority of income on electricity and heating costs than high-income communities. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund also published a similar [report](#) in 2019 on how water affordability issues disproportionately impact Black communities.

Black communities are also being [impacted the hardest](#) by the coronavirus pandemic on nearly all fronts, including having high death rates and losing jobs.

Most states have [rules](#) that prohibit the disconnection of water, gas and electricity during winter months and high temperatures as well as prohibit disconnections for those 65 years of age and older.

Action beyond a 'temporary solution'

Jason Bailey, special economic justice counsel for the NAACP LDF, which has urged state and local governments to impose a moratorium on shutoffs during the pandemic, told CNN the federal government should "step in and pass something that not only protects companies and people." Bailey also said states are taking a "piecemeal" approach on shut offs because there is no national leadership.

The \$2 trillion CARES Act allocated \$900 million to relief for low-income families and there is bipartisan support for additional funding for the program. Wolfe said that \$900 million is not enough and added that a national moratorium on shut offs is a temporary solution until there is a solution on how to pay the bills. He also said some utility companies should embrace forgiveness programs similar to those offered by some utility companies in Connecticut.

Michigan Rep. Brenda Lawrence is one of several Democrat lawmakers in favor of a nationwide moratorium on utility shut offs. Lawrence told CNN looking at programs such as SNAP and WIC that are based on income and need as well as

regulating water could help curb the impact of utility shut offs felt by customers and providers.

"In America you can get food stamps, you can get WIC, you can get food so that you will not be hungry in America. We're going to have to look at that policy," she said. "And we need to regulate the water just like we do other utilities to ensure we are not overcharging, that they're efficient."

The House-passed HEROES Act also contains a measure that would put a moratorium on shut offs during the pandemic, but Senate Republicans have [signaled](#) they do not plan to take up the bill.

Last month, Republican Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Mike Crapo of Idaho sent a joint letter to Senate leadership

Helping people after the public health crisis ends

Rawls is also working with other organizations to create a plan for a moratorium on disconnections in Georgia that is modeled after a Covid-19 utility relief plan [approved last month](#) by the Illinois Commerce Commission.

Bailey said he and the NAACP LDF is worried people will have their utilities shut off once the coronavirus pandemic ends.

"We need to think long and hard about helping people once the pandemic ends," Bailey said. "It's only going to exacerbate things in the Black community with Covid-19 if these things aren't in place."

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