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PECO has millions available to help with energy bills, but says few eligible customers are applying for assistance

On average, households behind on their bills owe about \$512, the utility company says



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JON TULEYA/PHILLYVOICE

PECO received \$270 million in federal and state funding through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, money that can be used to help people who can't pay their bills due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only a limited number of customers have enrolled, and to date only \$500,000 of that money has been spent.

Over the course of the last year, the United Way of Pennsylvania saw the volume of callers to its 211 help line increase by 110% due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The hotline is a way people in Pennsylvania can learn about resources in their communities, everything from after-school programs to help finding food to assistance paying expenses.

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From Philadelphia residents alone, the United Way received 54,000 calls, and more than 10,000 of those calls were from people seeking help paying their utility bills, Cinda Watkins, United Way's Human Services Senior Manager, said.

"It was remarkable. So many people were in need that we were extremely happy that we could be there for people, because they were definitely struggling," Watkins said.

PECO also has witnessed the economic effects of the pandemic. Pennsylvania's largest electric and natural gas utility company says among those who are behind on paying their energy bills, the average customer owes \$512.

"It's just an unprecedented level of need," Funmi Williamson, PECO's senior vice president of customer operations said. "I would say, probably last time we were this close to this was 2008-2009 timeframe, and this trumps that."

This makes it all the more puzzling why just 14% of PECO's eligible residential customers are utilizing the company's customer assistance programs.

PECO received \$270 million in federal and state funding through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, and Williamson said because of the limited number of customers who have enrolled, so far only \$500,000 of that money has been spent to help people with their bills.

PECO is headquartered in Philadelphia, and it has more than 1.6 million electric customers and more than 523,000 natural gas customers in Southeastern Pennsylvania. The company provides electricity to residents in Philadelphia. In the suburbs, PECO has electric and natural gas customers.

"There is still much great need out there that a lot of other customers would benefit from, but have not signed up yet," Williamson said. PECO said its customers can go on their website [PECO.com./help](https://www.pECO.com/help) for additional details on how to sign up.

Pennsylvania received a total of \$569 million in funding from the Emergency Rental Assistance Program to help renters, landlords and utility providers who have been affected financially by the COVID-19 pandemic. To qualify for assistance, a household must be renters and meet other criteria which can be found on the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services Website, such as a loss of household income or an increase in household expenses.

The ERAP money is use-it or lose-it, meaning if there are unused funds when at the end of the program, it will be returned to the government or reassigned. ERAP will run until at least September 2021, though it could be extended.

"We really want our customers to leverage that because that's not going to be there perpetually," Williamson said.

At the start of the pandemic, PECO worked on public outreach to spread the word on the new program.

"Unfortunately, the take rate – it's getting better, but it's been very low," Williamson said. Earlier in the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage of PECO customers receiving assistance paying their bills was in the single digits. It has climbed to 14%, which Williamson attributes to the city's eviction moratorium ending June 30.

"For a lot of folks, the threat of a termination or disconnect of service often serves as motivation, unfortunately, to get help," Williamson said.

Still, PECO has the capacity to help significantly more of its customers. Mayra Bergman, PECO's communications officer, said the company has amped up its outreach efforts to spread the word to people who might not know about it.

"We are seeing this new class of folks who are newly unemployed, who maybe never knew what it was to need the assistance or didn't know where to even begin to apply for assistance. Literally this pandemic has driven them to be unemployed," Bergman said.

Raven Williams, the Family Supportive Services Coordinator for Congreso de Latinos Unidos, said that organization has had trouble reaching people for utility bill assistance, as well.

Congreso, which helps people and families in predominantly Latino neighborhoods get connected to support services, had a dramatic decline in customer interactions at the start of the pandemic, she said.

"We honestly believe it's because the population that we work with just had a technology barrier," Williams said. "So even when we did have clients, it was also hard to plan that application. So either way those applications weren't going in."

Now that Congreso is back open for in-person appointments, more people are coming in seeking help. Williams said they are working to increase outreach to help more people in the area through social media, internal referrals and flyers in grocery stores.

"We seem to be almost on track to be how we were operating prior to the pandemic at this current moment. I would say those outreach methods are helping," she said.

How to apply for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program

People apply for the ERAP through the county in which they live. The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services website provides links to the application portals for Philadelphia, Montgomery, Delaware, Chester and Bucks.

You need a driver's license or passport, income information for all household members older than 18, a copy of your lease, your landlord's name and contact information, utility expenses and provider information. Applicants also need to show documentation for unemployment, proof of income, pay stubs and other wage statements and unearned income statements.

Photocopies, digital photographs and emails or letters from employers, landlords, or others with knowledge of your household's circumstance are accepted, as well.

All the information about how to apply can be found on the DHS website.

If approved, the ERAP assistance is typically paid directly to the landlord or utility provider. If the landlord or service provider opts not to participate, the funds will be sent to the tenant to use for payment.

Other PECO programs for utility assistance:

In addition to the assistance available through the ERAP, PECO offers customers other payment assistance programs, including deferred payment arrangements, income-qualified assistance programs.

PECO also has the Matching Energy Assistance Fund, which allows people to make donations. PECO typically matches those contributions, Williamson said, and the money helps eligible customers pay their utilities bills.

And during the winter, there is the federally-backed Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program that helps people pay their heating bills. Applications for this program open in November.

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