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Summer Heat Will Worsen the Pandemic for Poor Communities



Bill assistance and a moratorium on utility shutoffs will be crucial during a potentially record hot summer.

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Over 100 members of Congress have signed a letter urging leaders in both major parties to institute a utility shutoff moratorium as a safety measure during the pandemic. The letter, which came days after [800 environmental and energy justice groups](https://www.corporateaccountability.org/media/6390/) (<https://www.corporateaccountability.org/media/6390/>) called on Congress to act on energy justice, emphasized the outsized impact of coronavirus on poor, Black and Indigenous people.

The April 15 letter comes at a time of uncertainty as COVID-19 rages across the country and hot summer months are coming. For the communities that [already suffer disproportionate impacts](https://truthout.org/articles/trumps-epa-is-unleashing-the-pollution-that-makes-us-vulnerable-to-covid-19/) (<https://truthout.org/articles/trumps-epa-is-unleashing-the-pollution-that-makes-us-vulnerable-to-covid-19/>) from the virus, extreme heat will further complicate and worsen an already fraught situation.

“Utility insecurity is felt by low-wealth Americans, rural and tribal communities and people of color. Newly unemployed Americans are facing disconnection because of loss of income,” read [the letter](https://www.merkley.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/20.04.15%20Bicameral%20Utility%20Access%20Le)

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“These are the communities that need congressional protections the most.” Prohibiting utility shutoffs and encouraging reconnection will remove one stress factor for those whose homes no longer have access to water or electricity, or for those who fear an impending shutoff.

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“All crises, every equity indicator you can think of — it has been exacerbated and highlighted by this global pandemic,” says [Chandra Farley](https://psequity.org/just-energy/) (<https://psequity.org/just-energy/>), director of the Just Energy program for the Partnership for Southern Equity. Farley, along with collaborators from other justice and environmental organizations like the Center for Biological Diversity, has been leading the effort for Congress to issue a moratorium.

The moratorium will be crucial for people in poor, nonwhite communities. In many areas where COVID-19 mortality race statistics are reported, Black and Latinx people have been dying at a [higher proportion](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infesting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/?arc404=true) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infesting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmingly-high-rate-post-analysis-shows/?arc404=true>) than white patients, likely due to factors that chronically plague nonwhite

communities: financial insecurity, lack of health care access, long-term exposure to **harmful air pollution** (<https://truthout.org/articles/trumps-epa-is-unleashing-the-pollution-that-makes-us-vulnerable-to-covid-19/>), and existing underlying health conditions.

Utility access issues are yet another problem that could add to the disproportionate impact of this crisis. Extreme heat and poverty are linked; an **NPR** (<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/03/754044732/as-rising-heat-bakes-u-s-cities-the-poor-often-feel-it-most>) **investigation** (<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/03/754044732/as-rising-heat-bakes-u-s-cities-the-poor-often-feel-it-most>) last year showed that, within a city, lower average income is strongly tied to higher temperatures. In Baltimore, for instance, the investigation found that the hottest neighborhood, which also happens to be the poorest neighborhood in the city, is six degrees hotter than the coolest.

Thanks to global warming, the problem only gets worse as time goes on. According to forecasts from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2020 is virtually certain to be one of the **top 10 hottest years in recorded history** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/climate/global-temperatures-climate-change.html>), with a 50 percent chance of being the hottest ever. This includes **above-normal temperature forecasts** (https://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/predictions/long_range/fxus05.html) for the summer.

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Extreme heat, sans pandemic, is already a health issue for many families. Heat can cause hyperthermia and heat strokes, to which the elderly and people with respiratory issues are especially vulnerable. Heat also **traps air pollution** (<https://medialibrary.climatecentral.org/resources/summer-heat-means-stagnant-air>), making it even harder to breathe.

Thanks to assistance programs, access to an air conditioning unit isn't always the problem, but rather the big bills that come with it. "A lot of times, even if someone has an AC, it might only be one and they might have four bedrooms. Or they have an AC, but they can't afford to pay the bills, so they just don't turn it on," says **Sonal Jessel** (<https://www.weact.org/person/sonal-jessel/>), policy and advocacy coordinator at WE ACT for Environmental Justice. "So it's not just a question of 'do they have AC?' It's this question of 'is it enough, or is it even being utilized?'"

COVID-19 only multiplies these problems. If the president lifts the federal recommendation for stay-at-home orders, government officials at the departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services predict **another surge in cases** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/us/coronavirus-live-updates.html>) and an estimated death toll of 200,000. For the people who can't afford to keep their homes at a comfortable temperature — a growing number, due to the unprecedented spikes in unemployment over the past weeks — another surge presents a troubling Catch-22.

Cities typically designate public cooling centers like libraries, or people may go to places like public pools or movie theaters for relief from the heat. But these places, if they're even open, may be incubating centers for the virus. On the other hand, staying in a hot, energy inefficient home may be just as dangerous. It's up to people, already vulnerable, to decide "what's the lesser of two evils," says **Laura Goldberg** (<https://www.nrdc.org/experts/laura-goldberg>) of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).

Goldberg and **Dawone Robinson** (<https://www.nrdc.org/experts/dawone-robinson>), regional directors for NRDC's Energy Efficiency for All (EEFA) initiative, recently told *Truthout* that an effective salve for energy justice issues in the summer would be an expansion of energy efficiency and bill assistance programs.

Energy efficiency initiatives like EEFA are suffering under the pandemic. Such programs send workers into older, energy inefficient homes — or, in the case of EEFA, affordable housing units — and upgrade the infrastructure so the heating and cooling systems don't have to work as hard to maintain a comfortable temperature. "Most energy efficiency programs, especially residential low income-facing energy efficiency programs, are on hold because of stay-at-home orders," says Goldberg. "We're seeing workers get laid off. And it's not going to be a flip of a switch that moves all of a sudden to allow workers to just start up again" when the pandemic has died down.

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What's increasingly important for immediate relief for the summer, then, is an expansion of the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, or LIHEAP, which helps low-income households with heating and cooling bills — a program that the Trump administration previously **tried to cut completely** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/03/17/program-that-keeps-families-from-freezing-is-only-lower-impact-if-you-ignore-all-the-families-who-didnt-freeze/>). The recent stimulus package added \$900 million in funding to LIHEAP, which

will help, but ultimately will be wholly insufficient. Federal funding for LIHEAP typically hovers around \$3 billion per year, and the program typically only covers **20 percent of homes** (https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/AG-2017/2017AG_Ch05-So8_Low-Income-Home-Energy-Assistance-Program_LIHEAP.pdf) before it runs out of money.

In New York, Jessel says that politicians prioritize winter LIHEAP funding over the summer — the heat, to them, isn't as much of a problem. Goldberg and Robinson say that the NRDC, in pushing for more LIHEAP funding for the summer, has gotten “pushback” from federal politicians for the same reasons. “It's seen as just a winter month priority,” said Goldberg. “So, if there aren't going to be additional funds for people in summer months, that's going to be really problematic.”

A crucial part of the shutoff moratorium effort, then, is more funding for bill assistance under LIHEAP — not only during the pandemic, but also to ensure energy justice for the future. “The key piece of this is that we don't just need a moratorium,” says Farley. “We also wanted to make sure that we were pushing for reform that we have long needed around utilities: income-based payment plans and investment in distributed clean energy like rooftop solar, which we know can lower people's bills.” Energy democratization, she says, would help along that reform.

“Being able to stay at your home and then to *stay at your home comfortably* is really, really a privilege,” says Goldberg. “And I think this crisis more than ever is showing the disparities among different incomes in this country more than ever before.”

Allowing equal energy access and therefore allowing more people to stay home would undoubtedly help quash the spread of the virus. Members of Congress, asking for grace periods and late fee forgiveness, have urged the party leadership to make a step in that direction. The question is whether they will do so.

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