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Utility shutoffs should be a rallying cry for justice

5-7 minutes

Imagine if in this time of crisis, when we're all being asked to stay home and stay safe, your power is shut off. At the same time, you can't work and don't have the money to turn it back on. How would you keep your food safe, stay in virtual school or take care of yourself or a loved one who might be infected with COVID-19 or another illness?

That is the [cruel reality](#) millions of Americans are facing as electric utilities begin shutting off power to families who have fallen behind on their home energy and water bills because of the economic fallout from COVID-19.

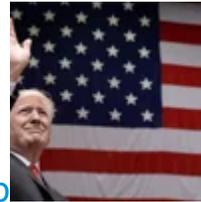
Not only is this infuriating and wrong, but it also reveals something deeply broken in our power system. Utilities are dumping [billions of dollars](#) into expensive, dirty coal and gas plants, while simultaneously nickel-and-diming the most vulnerable among us.

People suffering from chronic illnesses like diabetes are particularly vulnerable as they might not be able to [store their medications](#), like insulin, properly because it requires refrigeration. Some of these stories are framed as only a microcosm of the developing crisis in states like Georgia, where power was [shut off](#) to more than 40,000 customers from mid-July through August. Shockingly, similar crises

are happening to families [across our country](#).

In Alabama, customers who have fallen behind during the pandemic faced [resumed billing](#). This week, utilities in Colorado and Indiana will once again demand customers pay or go without water and power, despite the ongoing pandemic, record unemployment and winter a few months away.

Americans who are on the brink of power shutoffs — or already



without power — didn't ask for [President Trump](#) [Donald John Trump](#)[Hillary Clinton responds to Chrissy Teigen tweet: 'I love you back'](#) [Police called after Florida moms refuse to wear face masks at school board meeting about mask policy](#) [Supreme Court rejects Trump effort to shorten North Carolina mail-ballot deadline](#) [MORE](#) to sweep a pandemic under the rug in February, resulting later in hundreds of thousands of [deaths](#). He didn't ask for the economic fallout that came from mistakes that people at the highest level of government made. And he is not the reason utility bills are [so high in Georgia](#).

Even before COVID-19, many households that were low-income, Black, Latinx, Native American or seniors were struggling to pay their debts, and now these unaffordably high utility bills will likely lead to disconnections or shutoffs. Data from the 2017 American Housing Survey states that nationally, [67 percent](#) of low-income households (25.8 million) are facing a high energy burden and these are the families being hit hardest by power shutoffs.

At the same time that electric utilities are putting the squeeze on these vulnerable families, they're also picking their customers' pockets with costly and unnecessary fossil fuel and nuclear projects

that fatten their bottom lines — despite the fact that renewable energy is now cheaper than fossil fuels nationwide.

Utilities [companies](#) are [holding](#) onto costly coal plants that keep electricity bills high. Some are still [sinking billions](#) of dollars into botched nuclear plants and want to spend billions more on gas infrastructure that will be uncompetitive in less than a decade. [Others](#) are similarly holding onto coal, chasing nuclear and gas and sticking families with the bill. And as these companies dump billions into polluting projects and shut off power to low-income families, their CEOs are taking home multi-million dollar salaries.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Sure, we could continue providing subsidies for customers for a few more months, but that's just a band-aid. Imagine if those billions of dollars set aside for nuclear, gas and coal plants were instead spent on rooftop solar and energy efficiency systems for struggling households, bringing down their energy costs and cleaning up air and climate pollution. Imagine utility CEOs sacrificing part of their pay to help cover the bills of those who are hurting the most, instead of sticking households with high utility bills during the pandemic.

This is a problem Congress and our other federal leaders must solve. We need a national utility shutoff moratorium and a plan that invests more into clean energy and energy efficiency programs that will bring down costs for low-income families as close to zero as possible. We need to make rooftop solar, energy efficiency upgrades, clean appliances and local storage systems accessible enough so that low-income households don't have to choose between eating or having running water.

Investing more in clean energy has so many benefits. It will improve indoor and outdoor air quality at a time when coronavirus is

attacking our lungs. It will create jobs in the clean energy sector and help families pay their bills as our country struggles to recover from an economic crisis. And it will reduce carbon pollution as unnaturally dangerous wildfires and superstorms fueled by the climate crisis lands on our doorsteps.

The solutions to this problem are right in front of us. And if we act, if we lean into energy justice and innovation soon, we can look forward to the day when we won't open the paper and read about yet another person who can't pay to keep their lights on.

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