

## **DSS and Utilities – Emergency Assistance**

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### **I am behind on my utility bills. Is there anything I can do?**

Yes. You can apply for “emergency assistance.” Emergency assistance is not the same thing as HEAP. If you have received HEAP, the HEAP office is closed, or have been denied HEAP, you should then apply for emergency assistance. You must apply for HEAP first before you apply for emergency assistance, if HEAP is open.

### **Where do I apply for emergency assistance?**

1. If you are receiving Temporary Assistance you have to see your caseworker.
2. If not, you must apply at 478 Main Street, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor, Buffalo, New York. Complete the application and submit it when you get to DSS.

### **What do I need to bring with me when I apply for emergency assistance?**

You must bring the following papers:

1. A disconnect notice
2. A Financial Statement from the utility company
3. Photo ID for everyone in who is 18 and over your household (must also be present at DSS)
4. Proof of income
5. Proof of resources
6. Verify HEAP has been exhausted (if HEAP is open)
7. Proof of expenses:
  - (a) proof of housing costs: rent receipts/lease /landlord statement, mortgage statements
  - (b) other utility bills
  - (c) if you own a car, proof of your car payments and insurance costs
  - (d) out-of-pocket medical expenses, such as prescription co-pays
  - (e) childcare expenses

### **What if I cannot get all the documents that DSS is asking for?**

If you cannot get the documents, but have tried your best to get them, tell your worker. DSS has a duty to assist you in getting all the required documentation.

### **How do I get the financial statement from the utility company?**

If your emergency is a gas emergency, you must go to the National Fuel office at 409 Main Street, Buffalo, and bring the following items:

- \* Proof of income (for at least the past 8 weeks of either wages, SSI, or UIB)
- \* Identification
- \* Proof of expenses

National Fuel will decide whether they will offer you a “deferred payment arrangement (DPA).” If they offer you a DPA, you won’t need emergency assistance. If they deny your request for a DPA, they will state this on your financial statement. Bring the financial statement to the emergency services window at the Erie County Department of Social Services, 478 Main Street, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor.

If your emergency is an electric emergency, you can ask for the Financial Statement with National Grid over the telephone. You should also request a DPA from National Grid. If they deny your request, they will state this on your financial statement. Their phone number is 1-800-642-4272. NYSEG will fax this information to DSS. National Grid will send it electronically to DSS.

### **How much emergency assistance can I get?**

Generally, you will receive assistance with the last four months worth of utility arrears prior to your application. However, if the applicant is receiving SSI or Temporary Assistance, you will receive assistance with the most recent four months in which you received service from the 10 months prior to your application.

### **Do I have to repay this assistance?**

If you are not receiving Temporary Assistance or SSI (and you are not income eligible for Temporary Assistance) then you will have to sign a repayment agreement. You must repay the assistance within two years. If you default on this repayment agreement, you will not be able to obtain more emergency assistance for utilities from DSS in the future until you are current with the repayment agreement (**unless you are receiving SSI, Temporary Assistance or you are income eligible for Temporary Assistance at the time you make your second request for emergency assistance for utilities. If this is the case DSS may help you again even if there is an outstanding loan**). DSS can at their discretion give you another emergency assistance payment even if you have an outstanding loan. Ask them for their current policy because it changes annually.

If you are receiving Temporary Assistance, the Erie County Department of Social Services can recoup the assistance it paid you from your grant.

### **Is there an income limit on emergency assistance for utilities?**

No. Anyone can be eligible for emergency assistance if they do not have enough income or resources to meet the emergency.

### **Does the Erie County Department of Social Services have to interview me the same day I apply?**

Yes, at a minimum, you must be screened on the day you apply. This means that the Erie County Department of Social Services has to talk to you and decide whether you have an immediate need. An immediate need is when you have a disconnect notice scheduled for disconnection within 72 hours or are already shut off and you are applying for assistance. If you have an immediate need, the Erie County Department of Social Services must

either grant you the assistance the same day you apply, get a hold on your utility account until they are able to give you an appointment, or give you a denial in writing.

### **Do I have to be on Temporary Assistance to get this assistance?**

No, there are no income limits to get emergency assistance for utilities.

### **What if I am sanctioned?**

You can still get help. Sanctions do not apply for emergency assistance for utilities.

### **What if I am on SSI and my utilities are shut off?**

If you are approved for emergency assistance for utilities, the Erie County Department of Social Services will assist you with a payment of your most recent four months worth of utility service within the past ten months. Also, DSS will give you a six month guarantee of service. This means that DSS will guarantee active service for six months after the application. Any arrears you incur during the six months and do not pay, the utility company will bill DSS for the amount. Even if your service has been off for more than ten months, ECDSS can still assist you with the SSI guarantee of service.

### **What if I don't get the help I need?**

You should insist upon a written denial and contact our office for possible assistance. We can be reached at 847-0650.

If you are having problems getting Emergency Assistance, and you have given Erie County Department of Social Services all the documents you can provide, you should ask for a decision in writing and request a fair hearing. Notify OTDA by telephone, fax, or mail that you want a fair hearing. You can write on the back of your notice the reason for requesting the hearing. If you phone, get the name of the person you speak to. If you write, send your letter by certified mail and keep a copy. The correct address is:

New York State Office of  
Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA)  
Office of Administrative Hearings  
P.O. Box 1930  
Albany, New York 12201-1930  
Telephone No.: 1-800-342-3334  
Fax No. (518) 473-6735 (you must have the form from Albany)

If you have an emergency, you should ask for an "expedited" hearing. OTDA will determine if you have an emergency and may schedule the hearing more quickly.