

Questions To Ask When Attempting To Avoid A Utility Shutoff

Question 1. How much do you owe?

Ask to see the bill. If the customer has separate gas and electric bills ask to see both.

Question 2. What caused your emergency?

Unemployment? Illness? Death of a spouse? Etc.

Question 3. How many payments have you made in the last month or two?

Obtaining payment history information from the customer is important. You want to have a clear picture. You want to be prepared before contacting the utility company.

Question 4. In the last twelve months have you been on a budget plan?

Question 5. In the last twelve months did you sign a deferred payment agreement?

If a customer has had a budget agreement and broke it the company is not required to offer a second agreement within a twelve month period.

Question 6. What is your household income?

You want to explore eligibility for various energy assistance programs. New Jersey programs include: LIHEAP, USF, NJ SHARES, TRUE. For income guidelines see the chart at <http://www.njcommunityresources.info/njenergy.html>.

Question 7. Have you applied for or received LIHEAP or USF this season?

You want to develop a plan, so knowing the status of current or future benefits is worth exploring. For the status of pending direct applications contact the LIHEAP Hotline at 800-510-3102 or the local agency, if previously instructed.

Question 8. Has the household applied for emergency assistance under LIHEAP?

Households that are income eligible for LIHEAP and responsible for the heating bill have a small window of opportunity to receive emergency LIHEAP assistance. The emergency period usually occurs only between March 15 and April 30. The state may extend the emergency period depending upon availability of funds. Households who are not eligible for LIHEAP should inquire about the TRUE program or help from New Jersey SHARES. For information on these programs or organizations visit <http://www.ahanjtrue.com/index.html> or <http://www.njshares.org>, respectively.

Question 9. Has the customer ever been on USF? If not, explain the Fresh Start Program. See <http://www.njcommunityresources.info/njenergy.html>.

Question 10. Is the customer of record receiving benefits that would place them under Winter Termination Protection (WTP)?

The WTP is in effect between November 15 and March 15. For a list of protected categories see <http://www.njcommunityresources.info/wtp.html> or the Board of Public Utilities website at <http://www.bpu.state.nj.us/>.

Question 11. What if the customer is not in a “protected category”?

If the customer is not in any of the protected categories he/she could request protection under the ‘catch all’ category of the WTP. This category is based on circumstances beyond their control. Call the utility company and ask to be covered under the WTP.

Question 12. How much can the customer put down toward the outstanding bill?

Be realistic. Remember, the utility rep may ask for the entire amount but the customer need only pay up to a quarter of the bill, depending on the circumstances.

Question 13. How much can the customer afford to pay in future months?

Ask about a winter budget plan. Actually, a customer covered under the WTP **must** enroll in a winter budget plan as a condition of protection under the WTP.

Question 14. Are there any other factors that could be presented to the utility company that works to the customer’s favor?

Being able to present a positive image or a sympathetic story can't hurt.

Question 15. Does the customer have any old utility bills that may have been charged off from a former address?

Utility companies have the ability to check their computerized records and discover uncollected bills from prior years and may demand payment. This may create a barrier to having service turned on at a new address until the issue is resolved.

Question 16. What if the bill is in another person's name?

By placing a bill in another person's name it jeopardizes eligibility for LIHEAP, makes the household ineligible for the Universal Service Fund (USF), and is unfair to the person whose name the bill is in. A partial solution to this problem is to ask the utility company to have the proper name added to the bill. All the major utility companies in New Jersey subscribe to this practice.

Question 17. Has the customer, if responsible for their heating bill, received services under the Weatherization Assistance Program at their current address?

If no, call your local Weatherization agency. A complete statewide list of Weatherization contact names is available online at <http://www.state.nj.us/dca/divisions/dhcr/forms/docs/wealist.doc>.

Other low-income customers, including Section 8 tenants may be eligible for services from Comfort Partners, a state funded energy saving and energy education program for qualified low-income customers. They can be reached at 888-773-8326 and online at <http://www.njcleanenergy.com/residential/programs/comfort-partners/comfort-partners>.

For additional strategies on negotiating with a utility company see Avoiding Utility Shutoffs in New Jersey at http://www.njcommunityresources.info/utility_shutoff.html. This utility questions guide is available online at <http://www.njcommunityresources.info/utilityquestions.pdf>.