



**For Immediate Release**

**Oct. 27, 2021**

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## **Winter Heating Season is Almost Here. Get Ready Now.**

The upcoming winter heating season may be the most expensive in several years, and consumers should be preparing now.

Indiana's major natural gas utilities issued their winter billing projections this month, forecasting higher bills than last winter due largely to market conditions. The projections are based on current data and assume average weather. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) is projecting upcoming winter natural gas spot prices to average their highest levels since 2007-08.

Utilities buy natural gas in a competitive wholesale market and recover the costs through rates on a dollar-for-dollar basis. They may not profit on the wholesale cost pass-throughs, which require Indiana Office of Utility Consumer Counselor (OUCC) review and Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission (IURC) approval before taking effect.

Consumers who need financial assistance are encouraged to contact the statewide Indiana 211 help line, either by calling 2-1-1 or visiting <https://in211.communityos.org/> to learn about local options that may be available.

The federally funded Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is accepting applications now, along with new federal water bill assistance. Qualifying consumers can learn more, apply, and see a list of local LIHEAP service providers on the Indiana Housing & Community Development Authority's (IHCDA's) website at [www.in.gov/ihcda/homeowners-and-renters/low-income-home-energy-assistance-program-liheap/](http://www.in.gov/ihcda/homeowners-and-renters/low-income-home-energy-assistance-program-liheap/). Consumers without internet access may call IHCDA toll-free at 1-800-872-0371 to get connected to a network of community action agencies.

Township trustees and certain utilities also offer financial assistance. IHCDA has additional information at [www.in.gov/ihcda/homeowners-and-renters/](http://www.in.gov/ihcda/homeowners-and-renters/).

"If you are behind on your bills or concerned about your ability to pay, you should contact your gas and electric utilities now to discuss payment arrangements," said Indiana Utility Consumer Counselor Bill Fine. "Contacting your utilities sooner instead of later is crucial, especially if you are concerned about being disconnected at any point."

All consumers should consider budget billing options. Most Indiana electric and natural gas utilities offer budget billing, which provides a consistent monthly payment. The utility sets the monthly amount over a specific period – normally a year – based on the customer's expected usage. A true-up is applied in the 12<sup>th</sup> month, with a credit or balance typically applied to the next year.

"A customer on budget billing will pay the same amount for gas or electricity over the long term," continued Fine. "But the plan will provide certainty through the year's coldest months, allowing the customer to prepare."

This is also a good time to schedule a home heating system tune-up, especially if you have not had one in some time. Regular maintenance is crucial for making sure an HVAC system is working efficiently and safely.

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Several additional steps will help add up to energy savings in your home or business:

- Make sure your HVAC system has a clean filter. Change or clean it regularly.
- If your furnace has a humidifier, use it. It will make the air feel warmer.
- Look at your attic's insulation if you haven't done so in a few years. It may have settled over time and may not be protecting your home as much as it once did.
- Keep vents clean and make sure they are not blocked by furniture, rugs, or other items.
- Lower the thermostat a few degrees when going to bed or leaving home for more than 5 hours. A "smart" or programmable thermostat can do this automatically. See if your utility offers rebates on new thermostats.
- Set each ceiling fan to turn clockwise and run it on a low setting, to push warm air down. Turn it off when no one is in the room.
- Use exhaust fans sparingly, if at all. They will pull warm air out of the building more quickly than you might think.
- Close the damper if you have a fireplace you are not using.
- Unplug phone chargers and other electronic devices when you are not using them.
- Check the temperature on your water heater. In most homes, it does not need to be higher than 120 degrees.
- Clean or vacuum the coils on your refrigerator.
- Consider getting rid of the extra refrigerator or freezer in the garage. Certain utilities will haul them off and even pay you for them.
- Caulk, weather strip, and seal drafty windows and doorways.
- Open curtains and blinds during the day. Close them at night.
- If you're buying new appliances, look for the Energy Star and WaterSense labels. Be aware that your utility may offer rebates.

The OUCC offers more energy efficiency tips at [www.in.gov/oucc/natural-gas/tips-and-publications/reduce-your-winter-energy-bills/](http://www.in.gov/oucc/natural-gas/tips-and-publications/reduce-your-winter-energy-bills/). In addition, consumers should check with their electric and gas utilities to see what energy efficiency programs they offer. These may include an energy audit, either in person or online.

Additional online resources include the Energy Star Home Energy Yardstick ([www.energystar.gov/campaign/home-energy-yardstick](http://www.energystar.gov/campaign/home-energy-yardstick)), and the U. S. Department of Energy's guide to Do-It-Yourself Home Energy Audits ([www.energy.gov/energysaver/home-energy-audits/do-it-yourself-home-energy-audits](http://www.energy.gov/energysaver/home-energy-audits/do-it-yourself-home-energy-audits)).

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Consumers should also be aware of the state's winter disconnection moratorium, which applies only under specific circumstances. By law, electric and natural gas utilities in Indiana may not disconnect service between Dec. 1 and Mar. 15 if the consumer: 1) Is receiving help from the federally funded Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), or 2) Has formally applied for LIHEAP funds and has qualified, with the utility receiving written proof.

Customers who are protected by the moratorium are strongly encouraged to continue to pay heating bills through the winter, even if they can only make partial payments.

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The Indiana Office of Utility Consumer Counselor (OUCC) represents Indiana consumer interests before state and federal bodies that regulate utilities. As a state agency, the OUCC's mission is to represent all Indiana consumers to ensure quality, reliable utility services at the most reasonable prices possible through dedicated advocacy, consumer education, and creative problem solving.