SOARING ENERGY BILLS & DIRTY AIR

HOW TO HOLD UTILITIES ACCOUNTABLE

If your monthly electric bills are going up—and are noticeably higher than last year right now—you're not alone.

And critically, you're not without help. There are state government agencies responsible for regulating essential services like electricity and methane gas.

Each state has a different name for it, like Public Utility Commission (PUC) or Corporation Commission, but the job is the same: to make sure utilities provide safe, reliable, and affordable service to all customers.

PUC commissioners may be appointed or elected, depending on the state, and are there to protect people from extreme energy costs by rejecting unfair price increases and ensuring utilities prioritize affordability over corporate profits. PUC oversight is critical as utilities often spend heavily on expensive new gas plants and pipelines or corporate branding instead of focusing on customer accessibility.

PUCs can also protect public health by directing utilities to prioritize cleaner renewable energy (like wind and solar), expand energy efficiency and weatherization, and avoid new fossil fuel infrastructure (like coal or gas power plants). This makes PUCs essential to reducing climate-heating greenhouse gas emissions and limiting air pollution—and all its associated health concerns—all over the country.

PUCs, air pollution, and community health

While PUCs don't regulate air pollution directly, their decisions influence the types of energy used in your state (polluting fossil fuels versus cleaner energy sources), which affects air quality, climate pollution, and community health. People living closest to sources of dirty energy are at increased health risks. Air pollution associated with the energy-sucking AI data centers currently being built at a rapid pace across the country is expected to result in as many as 1,300 premature deaths per year by 2030.

Energy burden, the percentage of a household's income spent on energy costs, is also an issue of equity. High utility bills force impossible choices. No family should be pushed into debt or risk having their electricity shut off because of corporate decisions. Economically disadvantaged families and communities of color already pay a higher percentage of their income for electricity and are the most vulnerable to extreme heat, cold, and pollution. When electricity becomes unaffordable, families living in older, inefficient homes, especially renters, may reduce heat in winter or AC in dangerous heat waves to save money so they can afford groceries and more, putting children, seniors, pregnant people, and those with asthma or heart conditions at serious risk.

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The mission of Moms Clean Air Force is to protect children from air pollution and climate change. We envision a safe, stable, and equitable future where all children breathe clean air. We fight for Justice in Every Breath, recognizing the importance of equitable solutions in addressing air pollution and climate change. www.momscleanairforce.org

More about PUCs

Most people haven't ever directly engaged with their state PUC, but if you're concerned about electricity bills and unhealthy air from highly polluting electricity sources, it's worth getting involved. When utilities propose rate hikes or invest in more fossil fuel plants and pipelines, families suffer the consequences, including those higher monthly bills, greater energy burden, increased risk during extreme heat and cold, plus increased pollution and climate impacts. Here are some helpful things PUCs can typically do:

- Set electricity rates, including approving or denying rate increases and determining the amount of utility profit to include in rates.
- Set rules for how utilities plan for new energy demand, including huge demand from the many AI data centers currently on the rise nationwide, as well as who pays for the associated grid infrastructure.
- Influence whether utilities invest in fossil fuel plants, pipelines, or renewable energy projects.
- Hold utilities accountable when they mismanage money so the costs don't get passed on to customers.

You may be paying secret fees

Utility companies consistently earn strong profits, usually by building new infrastructure and forcing households to pay for it. Sometimes they charge hidden fees. Utility bills can be hard to read; they're notoriously confusing. Utility companies can pass along the cost of, for example, expanding gas power plants or building transmission pipelines, without customers understanding or noticing. And sometimes utilities just overcharge, which is why PUCs are so important. In Nevada, for example, NV Energy has famously overcharged tens of thousands of customers by millions of dollars since 2001, according to an investigation by staff at the Public Utilities Commission of Nevada (PUCN). The utility has since proposed a total of $63 million in refunds to customers. This kind of overcharge can happen anywhere, which is why staying informed matters in every state.

Raise your voice

PUCs exist to protect the public. Simply engaging with your PUC can prevent unjust cost burdens on residential electricity customers and impact air pollution, health, and well-being.

Familiarize yourself with the energy issues where you live and speak out—show up to utility commission hearings, share your story, and provide testimony. Help other community members to do the same for broader impact, connecting the dots between rising electricity bills, fossil fuel investments, health impacts on children, and energy burden and equity when pushing for clean energy solutions.

Some states even pay community members to participate in PUC hearings—this is called intervenor compensation funding. Ask if your state offers this.

Regulators must reject unjustified rate increases and put public health and affordability first.

Additional information

Visit www.momscleanairforce.org to learn more.

Full list of sources:
www.momscleanairforce.org/sources-utilities-accountable

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