

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend Washington, on Thursday, August 19. I'm Will O'Donnell, Communications Director for the Jefferson County Public Utility District #1.

The financial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and related shutdowns continue to reverberate in our community. The PUD currently has over 1,100 customers with delinquent power or water bills. Many of our past-due customers haven't made a payment in the last three months, and some haven't made a payment in the last year. Past-due and unpaid PUD bills currently total over \$700,000, an unprecedented amount. But of course, these are unprecedented times.

When COVID-19 came to Jefferson County in March of 2020, the PUD's board of commissioners quickly moved to discontinue all residential disconnects for non-payment. The PUD didn't want anyone to risk losing access to electricity or clean water when ordered to stay inside their homes. Shortly after, Governor Inslee put in place a statewide moratorium banning the shut off of all utility services for residential customers in Washington State. Though the moratorium has been extended multiple times, it is currently slated to end on September 30, 2021. Which means that on October 1, up to 1,100 shut-off notices could be generated if action isn't taken.

Jefferson County PUD doesn't want to see any customer face a loss of service because of past-due bills. And we shouldn't have to, because right now there are more ways than ever for customers to get help catching up on bills. There are funds for renters with past due rental payments and past-due utility bills, with qualifying renters getting up to 12 months of past-due assistance. There are federal funds available locally to help with past or future home heating costs, whether it's electric, propane, or wood and heating oil. And a new fund for water bills is also on the way.

If you have past-due bills, don't wait till September 30, reach out to the PUD today. Call 360-385-5800 Monday through Friday from 9am to 4:30pm to speak to one of our trained customer service representatives. They can connect you with just the right program to get you back on track with your bills and avoid service interruption. They can also help customers sign up for low-income and senior-discount rates – budget billing – to keep payments close to the same all year long, and payment arrangements to spread past-due amounts over multiple months.

Help is also available directly from the Olympic Community Action Program, or OlyCAP. OlyCAP manages most of the federally funded programs mentioned earlier. They can be reached at 360-385-2571. OlyCAP staff has asked us to let those struggling with bills know that their eligibility rules have recently changed. If you applied but didn't receive funding in the past, OlyCAP recommends you try again.

Customers who aren't struggling can also pitch in to help by rounding up their monthly payment or donating larger sums to our Rainy-Day Fund. In 2020 we received record donations of over \$40,000 to this fund to help our customers in need. We'd like to see the same total in 2021. OlyCAP and St. Vincent De Paul use these funds to help keep power, water, and sewer service on for some of our county's most at-risk residents.

Let's all help each other. Go to JEFFPUD DOT ORG SLASH ASSISTANCE (<https://www.jeffpud.org/assistance>) to learn more. I'm Will O'Donnell for the PUD. Thanks for listening to KPTZ.