

Weatherization During Winter Toolkit



Introduction

As refugees and other newcomers navigate daily life in the U.S., many face unfamiliar weather, including cold winter climates. As such, newcomers may not know how seasonal changes affect their health and, in a completely different way, their finances.

As the winter season draws near in many parts of the U.S., it is paramount to prioritize the safety of the families and individuals we serve by introducing them to resources that can help them protect their health and save on winter home heating costs.

It is a widespread misconception that weatherization exclusively benefits homeowners. This energy-efficient process is equally advantageous for renters, helping them in conserving energy and reducing expenses.

This toolkit was designed by the Refugee Housing Solutions team to provide practical weatherization techniques and valuable tips to resettlement staff, volunteers, refugee sponsors, and other community members. These techniques and tips will assist newcomers in conserving energy, ultimately helping them reduce their utility costs. This toolkit covers:

- What weatherization is
- Why weatherization is important for newcomers
- Who is responsible for what weatherization responsibilities (landlord/tenant)
- Winter weatherization practices
- Weatherization utility assistance programs
- Disconnection laws (hot weather rule / cold weather rule)

Refugee Housing Solutions (RHS) is an initiative funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration to engage refugee resettlement stakeholders to expand and improve safe, dignified, affordable housing options for newcomers to the U.S. RHS is a project within Church World Service (CWS) and the RHS team was formed to lead a unified housing solutions effort among 10 national resettlement agencies (RA) and their 340+ local offices and affiliates. Working together, these teams and individuals who comprise them, seek safe, affordable housing for refugees and other newcomers to the U.S.

Disclaimer: The contents of this toolkit are intended for informational purposes only. Refugee Housing Solutions makes no claims or guarantees of the completeness or accuracy of the information herein. Nothing contained in this toolkit constitutes an endorsement or recommendation.

What Winter Weatherization Is

Weatherization, also known as weatherproofing or winterizing, involves taking steps to save energy and still maintain comfortable* indoor temperatures in apartments or homes. This is done by making repairs or improvements, particularly to roofs, walls, windows, doors, water heaters, and duct work.

**Given the severity of some winter temperatures and the high cost of heating fuel (electricity, gas, or oil), it is important for newcomers to understand the financial cost of keeping their homes warm.*

While weatherproofing is commonly associated with homes, it is equally beneficial for apartments. *Importantly, there are federal and state programs available to assist with weatherization projects, including their costs.* Later in this toolkit, these utility assistance programs will be outlined explore how they can support newcomers with weatherization efforts, regardless of whether they live in an apartment or home.

Why Weatherization Is Important for Newcomers

Newcomers should be aware of the importance of weatherization because it not only helps them save energy and money. It can also positively impact a household's physical and emotional health.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases are a significant health concern for refugees and immigrants, especially those transitioning from generally warmer to colder climates. Respiratory and cardiovascular diseases are a substantial reason for refugees seeking health care.

- **Indoor Air Quality** | Proper weatherproofing can improve indoor air quality and help eliminate air allergens like pests, mold, and dust mites. *It can also help with temperature control, especially during extreme weather conditions.* For example, when homes are too cold in winter or too hot in the summer, this can trigger preexisting medical conditions or cause someone to develop a new illness.

A weatherized home also helps reduce fatigue, anxiety, and stress, thereby improving sleep as well as comfort with daily activities. As a result, there are fewer instances of poor health, which translates, for example, to a decrease in missed work and school days and/or reduced doctor or emergency room visits and hospitalizations.

- **Saves Money and Energy** | As noted, many newcomers to the U.S. face unfamiliar weather and climates. They are also likely unaware of how seasonal changes can impact their health and finances. Unfortunately, *low-income households, which include many newcomers, bear a heavy energy cost burden.* Spending about 13% of annual income on utilities, many must forgoe spending on groceries and healthcare.

NOTE: A 2021 U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) fact sheet reported that households implementing weatherization improvements, making upgrades, and adopting energy-saving practices can achieve substantial savings. On average, these measures result in an 18% reduction in winter heating costs and a 7% decrease in annual electricity use leading to an average saving of \$283 a year.

So, along with other low-income households across the U.S., newcomers should receive as much information as possible about ways to save money by weatherizing their homes – with landlord support and cooperation. Information must also be shared about what might need to become a “new normal” for indoor home temperatures.

- **Increase Safety and Comfort** | When a house or apartment is well weatherized, and the family follows energy-saving practices, the household is taking a responsible approach to home safety by avoiding risky behaviors like overusing space heaters or using the oven as a heat source, both of which are fire hazards and can also strain electrical systems to a circuit breaking point.

Who Is Responsible for Weatherization

With rentals, it can be challenging to determine the division of responsibilities for weatherization between landlords and tenants. Since the landlord-tenant relationship is, ideally, a partnership, it is imperative that tenants work cooperatively with their landlords to weatherize their apartments or house. So, it is essential for resettlement staff or volunteers to help newcomers carefully review their lease to understand who is responsible for what when it comes to weatherization.

Standard landlord weatherization responsibilities are listed below, and it is crucial for resettlement agency staff to (i) review each newcomer household's lease with the tenant and (ii) consult with each landlord to ensure clear mutual understanding.

Landlord Responsibilities

- **Understand Property Maintenance Laws** | These laws differ by state, city/town, etc., but generally, landlords are required to make sure their properties are safe and habitable.
- **Repair exterior surfaces**, e.g., brick or siding, damage and **interior wall/ceiling cracks**, which can lead to poor insulation/lost heat.
 - **Seal Leaky Windows**
While tenants can do basic sealing, it is ultimately a landlord responsibility to winterize or replace leaky windows.
 - **Insulation**
Landlords are responsible to ensure the insulation of heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) ducts as well as water heaters and water pipes. However, tenants can take proactive measures to protect pipes from freezing during cold weather. For example, by leaving sink faucets on a low, slow drip the continuous water flow helps prevent pipes from freezing and reduces the risk of them bursting.
 - **Heating System Maintenance**
Especially during winter months, landlords must ensure that heating systems function properly, and schedule regular inspections and servicing for furnaces, boilers, and HVAC systems.
 - **Clean and Insulate Chimneys**
If the rental property has a chimney that vents a fireplace, it must be inspected regularly by a certified professional to ensure safety and proper functionality.
 - **Inspect and Clean/Clear Roofs and Gutters**
Before the onset of winter, a landlord must inspect and clean roofs and gutters not least because accumulated leaves and debris can cause water damage, even basement flooding, leading to foundation breakdown and pest breeding — all of which impact tenants' safety and health.
 - **HVAC System Upkeep**
While system maintenance is a landlord responsibility, during the winter, tenants can replace furnace filters more frequently than in other seasons to ensure improved heating and air quality. **NOTE:** In most cases, the responsibility for filter replacement lies with the landlord under the property maintenance laws. However, it is important for tenants to talk with landlords to know if they are responsible for filter changing. If so, it is crucial for this to be stated in the lease. The landlord must provide instructions and agree on a schedule for filter replacement. **It must also be agreed who is responsible for buying the filters, and whose cost it is.**

- **Install Programmable Thermostats**
While not legally required, state of the art thermostats enhance heating and cooling system control to optimize energy use and reduce costs. So, positive landlord-resettlement agency-tenant rapport can help when suggesting the installation of a programmable thermostat. NOTE: There are governmental programs that help property owners upgrade their thermostats.
- **Practice Proactive Maintenance**
Landlords can ensure weatherization by consistently practicing preventative maintenance throughout the year.

Tenant Responsibilities

As noted, a lease must clearly outline tenant responsibilities for weatherization activities by season. If a lease does not include specific requirements, newcomer tenants can still adopt energy-saving practices for weatherization and comfort, and to save money.

Winter Weatherization Practices

Here are some helpful energy-saving tips for newcomer tenants:

- **Storm Windows and Doors** | Ensure that all storm windows and doors are securely closed to maximize insulation and reduce energy costs.
- **Block Windowsill and Window Frame Drafts** | Block window drafts by using weatherstripping, plastic insulation, thermal curtains and/or window blinds, and even nail polish to seal small gaps around the window frame.
- **Block Outside Door Drafts** | Drafts that come in at the bottom edge of the door can be blocked with a store-bought door sweep or draft stopper, or by rolling up a rug or big towel and placing it on the floor in the entry door(s) way.
- **Let the Sunshine In** | Take advantage of natural heating by letting sunshine in during the day. Once rooms are warmed up, close curtains and blinds at sunset to trap the heat in the home.
- **Rugs** | Enhance rooms' warmth with rugs to insulate the room and reduce heat loss. Large rugs offer better insulation and heat loss reduction than smaller ones.
- **Wall Decoration** | Enhance rooms' insulation by hanging carpets or other fabrics as wall decorations. While walls do not conduct heat or let cold in as readily as windows, they can still release significant warmth and reduce the impact of cold. Besides carpets and textiles, paintings, mirrors, and bookshelves help insulate living spaces.
- **Humidifiers** | Humidifiers are essential for maintaining indoor comfort as they make people feel warmer and lessen the need for heat. This is because dry air makes the temperature feel colder. A humidifier can help retain the heat produced by a furnace, which reduces wear and tear on the furnace and helps save money on energy costs.
- **Designate a Warm Room** | Resettlement agency staff and volunteers can encourage newcomer clients to select one room for a designated "warm space" while maintaining cooler temperatures in other areas. This strategy can be particularly beneficial during winter emergencies as it offers an especially well-insulated space to be warm and comfortable.

- **Extra Layers of Clothing** | Agency staff and volunteers can also encourage newcomers to wear added layers of clothing when in the house during the day and use extra blankets on beds to stay warm at night. Both practices are essential for maintaining body warmth.
- **Check Vents for Blockages** | Obstructions such as furniture, storage boxes, etc. should be moved away from heating vents since airflow is crucial for the efficient operation of heating (and cooling) systems. Blocked vents can increase pressure on an HVAC system, causing it to work harder than necessary and potentially shortening its lifespan. Additionally, in the winter, blocked vents restrict heat flow and may pose a fire hazard. Resettlement agency staff or volunteers should help newcomer renters understand these details to help them stay warm and safe during the winter.

Other Energy Saving Practices

- **Install Switch Outlet Insulation** | Installing switch and outlet insulating sealers is one of the easiest and most cost-effective weatherization projects. By simply installing sealers on light switches and electrical outlets, you can reduce cold drafts during the winter and prevent cool air from escaping in the summer.
- **Showering Versus Bathing** | There is a common misconception that taking a bath saves more water than showering. However, a bathtub can use up to 70 gallons of water, while a five-minute shower typically uses 10 to 25 gallons, especially if a low-flow showerhead is used. Turning the water off while soaping during the duration of shower helps control the flow and waste of water.
- **Preheat Oven** | Please advise your client to preheat the oven as required for specific recipes. Additionally, suggest to newcomer clients that, if possible, they cook multiple items simultaneously because it can be an efficient way to utilize the oven's capacity. Another energy saving tip is if they have an electric oven using it during off-peak hours, which are 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. or 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. if possible.
- **Unplug Appliances** | Encourage your clients to unplug appliances they do not use to save between \$100 and \$200 per year on their energy bills. "Vampire power" refers to the standby power consumed by unused appliances when they are plugged in and can account for up to 10% of a home's energy usage.
- **Turning Off Lights/LEDs** | Turning off the lights when they are not in use and replacing incandescent bulbs with LEDs saves energy and reduces heat. LEDs not only use significantly less energy than other types of bulbs but also provide better quality light in many cases. Although LED bulbs are expensive, some government and power companies offer subsidies and lighting rebates because of their benefits.

Winter Safety Tips

- **Do Not Use the Oven as a Heat Source** | Whether newcomer tenants have an electric or gas oven, they know that *under no circumstances should the oven be used as a space heater*. The dangers of this practice must be made clear. Gas ovens can have the potential to develop a deadly gas leak, and electric ovens have their own hazards if used improperly.
- **Space Heaters** | It is vital that newcomer tenants know proper space heater use to prevent hazards such as overheating and even fires. Resettlement agency staff and volunteers should advise tenants to not leave heaters on when no one is home, and to ensure that units are not placed too close to things, e.g., clothing or paper, that may catch fire. Separately, remember that the primary goal of winterization is to conserve energy, and it is worth noting that *excessive use of space heaters can significantly increase energy consumption (electricity usage), which will cost money*.

- **Proper Candle Usage** | Candles, like ovens, must never be used as a heat source. Just like space heaters, candles should never be left unattended or placed near flammable items. Resettlement agency staff and volunteers should remind newcomers of this.
- **Create an Emergency Kit** | For the unlikely event of an extreme snow or acute cold situation, agency staff and volunteers should help newcomer tenants know how to create an emergency kit with non-perishable food, drinking water, First Aid supplies and medicines, and important documents (in case there in an evacuation). Go to the [Red Cross website](#) for more information.
- **Register a Household Medical Condition with Utility Providers** | If a newcomer household member relies on electrically powered medical equipment, it is vital to ensure they are registered with their electricity provider. Typically, the provider will request a completed form and a physician's documentation. This documentation is crucial as it will prompt the provider to prioritize restoring services promptly in the event of a power outage.

Weatherization Utility Assistance Programs

The **Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)** is a federal government program designed to provide financial support to low-income households. LIHEAP helps households pay energy bills during both winter and summer, ensuring that everyone can stay warm in the winter and cool in the summer. This helps to reduce the risk of health and safety issues related to extreme temperatures, which are occurring more frequently in recent years than in the past. In some states, the LIHEAP open enrollment period for senior citizens and individuals with disabilities is in October and for the general population in November.

Why is the LIHEAP Program Important to Newcomers?

- LIHEAP is as vital for newly arrived newcomer individuals and families as it supports paying their utility expenses.
- By lowering utility costs, LIHEAP allows newcomers to allocate their limited financial resources towards other critical needs, thus bolstering overall financial stability.
- One of LIHEAP's objectives is to prioritize households with the highest energy requirements. Often, newcomer households are large, resulting in higher energy needs and increased utility costs. This program is beneficial not only to low-income families but also to households with large energy consumption.

What Assistance Does LIHEAP Provide?

LIHEAP eligibility varies by state, so states have flexibility to decide the type(s) of assistance they provide. Here are examples of assistance provided:

- One-time payment of utility bills. Check with your state for the various seasonal enrollment months.
- Energy Crisis Intervention Program (ECIP) assists with paying energy bills for households receiving a termination or disconnect notice.
- [Weatherization Assistance Program \(WAP\)](#) helps with energy-related home repairs.

Additional Information

Produced by Administration for Children and Families, which is a division of the Department of Health and Human Service that includes the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), these videos give an overview of LIHEAP programs for cooling and heating assistance.

- [LIHEAP Cooling Assistance](#)
- [LIHEAP Heating Assistance](#)

LIHEAP Requirements

As noted, eligibility does vary by state, but some general eligibility requirements for LIHEAP assistance are shared below. For specific requirements for your state, [contact your local LIHEAP office](#) or call the toll-free LIHEAP phone number at 1-866-674-6327.

Newcomer Eligibility

A newcomer (“alien” in Federal law for LIHEAP purposes) may be eligible for LIHEAP assistance if they:

- Are responsible to pay utilities bills for their home: a house, duplex, apartment, etc.
- Reside in the state from which they are seeking assistance
- Have proof of residence, i.e., lease. Or if they own a home, a deed or property tax bill
- Have an annual household income below the maximum income level allowed for their household size and state
- Provide proof of income for all household members 18 years and older
- Have been legally admitted for permanent residence and meet all other LIHEAP program requirements
- Other qualified non-citizens include these categories: People admitted to the U.S. as a refugee under Section 207 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)
- Individuals and families granted asylum under Section 208 of the INA
- Those having deportation withheld under section 243(h) or 241(b)(3) of the INA
- Having Cuban-Haitian Entrant status
- Admitted as Amerasian immigrants
- Those being paroled into the U.S. for at least 1 year under section 212(d)(5) of the INA
- Individuals granted conditional entry under section 203(a)(7) of the INA
- An alien [AKA, refugee/newcomer] who has been battered or subjected to extreme cruelty...by a spouse or a parent, or by a member of the spouse or parent’s family residing in the same household as the [refugee/newcomer] and the spouse or parent consented to, or acquiesced in, such battery or cruelty, but only if (in the opinion of the agency providing such benefits) there is a substantial connection between such battery or cruelty and the need for the benefits to be provided
- Those having a petition pending that sets forth a prima facie case for status as a spouse or child of a U.S. citizen

General Documentation Required for a LIHEAP Application

- Photo ID for the applicant. Check with a local LIHEAP office for accepted ID types
- Identification documents for all household members, e.g., birth certificates, school records (as relevant), Social Security cards, I-94s, or other newcomer identity verification documents.
- Proof of address, e.g., a copy of lease
- Proof of income for all household members 18 and older, e.g., recent proof of income (paystub, job offer letter with salary/wage stated) or a letter from a resettlement agency outlining relevant/related benefits.
- A recent copy of utility bill(s)
- Final notice on termination (utility) services, i.e., shut-off notice
- Vacancies are filled promptly, thus maximizing rental income.

Utility Disconnection Laws

In most states, laws, rules, and regulations determine when an electric, gas, water, or utility company can shut off a customer's service. These rules and laws are designed to prevent a shut-off of heat, power, or electricity during critical temperatures in the winter and summer.

The disconnection laws vary by state and are in place to protect the elderly, families with children, and those with disabilities and medical conditions. The states regulate whether a utility company can turn off the heat in cold winter months or if an energy company can turn off electricity or lights during hot summers, among other scenarios.



The Hot Weather Rule

This is when the National Weather Service predicts that during certain months if temperatures rise above certain degrees, services cannot be disconnected or shut off.



The Cold Weather Rule

This is when the National Weather Service predicts that during certain months, if temperatures drop below a certain degree, services cannot be disconnected or shut off.

Medical Necessity for Utilities | As mentioned earlier, if you discover that a newcomer or someone in their household relies on electricity for medical equipment, they should register with the local power company and community energy program. If there is a documented medical condition, depending on the state rules, a utility provider must postpone the shut-off if the shut-off affects the medical conditions.

Landlord Responsible for Utilities | If the landlord is responsible for utilities and a shut-off is about to happen, the resident can demand that the landlord pays the bill immediately. If the landlord agrees to pay, the resident should find out when and confirm with the utility company. If the landlord does not pay, there are 2 ways to stop the shut-off: an Emergency Tenant Remedy Action or paying the bill and deducting it from the rent. Utilities responsibility should be discussed during the signing and outline in the lease.

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Disconnect policies | The LIHEAP Clearinghouse. (n.d.).
<https://liheapch.acf.hhs.gov/Disconnect/disconnect.htm>

Additional Resources

- [The Weatherization Assistance Program Fact Sheet](#)
- [Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program \(LIHEAP\)](#)
- [Disconnect Policies](#)



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