

PEOPLE OVER PROFIT: THE CAMPAIGN FOR UTILITIES JUSTICE IN ALBANY, GA

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A Note to Our Funders & Donors

At 9to5, our mission is to build a movement to achieve economic justice for working women. Our programs and campaigns provide a vehicle through which marginalized women work together to take action and win the policy change we need to make a better world. We believe that systemic change is accomplished by engaging directly impacted women, and providing the resources and tools for them to lead their communities. For nearly 50 years, 9to5 has boldly confronted racial and gender injustices by working on everyday issues that affect families – paid leave, childcare, equal pay, sexual harassment in the workplace, utilities and housing.

Since 2017, 9to5 Georgia has been at the epicenter of organizing in Southwest Georgia on the issues of high light bills. We co-founded the Albany Coalition to Lower Utility Bills (ACLUB) to identify the reasons for high utility bills and organize local community members around the issue. Since then, 9to5 and ACLUB have integrated utilities justice into key voter engagement work in the region, trained women to demand solutions from their city leaders, and worked with other advocates to bring attention to the utilities crisis, but there is more to be done.

No one's light bill should be higher than their rent. No one should have to choose between paying for their light bill, or paying for groceries. Yet, these are the financial burdens facing women and families across Georgia. These burdens create major financial insecurity, specifically for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) women and families in rural communities who often bear the brunt of unjust housing and utility policies and racist systems.

The purpose of this report is to shed light on the utilities crisis in Albany, GA, and highlight some of the root causes behind the \$300, \$400 to \$800 light bills families receive every month and the movement to end unjust housing and utility policies rooted in racism. We are honored to work with women every day who take risks to organize and demand better, and we invite all readers of this report to support them and us in shaping a better Southwest Georgia, and a new South.

Mica Whitfield, 9to5 Georgia State Director



Table of Contents

What is 9to5?	3
What is Utilities Justice?	5
How did we get here?	5
So why are the light bills so high?	6
<i>Monopoly of Energy</i>	7
<i>Challenges with Local and State Accountability and Governance</i>	9
<i>Poor Housing Conditions</i>	11
<i>Climate and Energy</i>	12
What is the movement doing?	14
<i>Albany Coalition to Lower Utility Bills</i>	14
<i>Utilities Justice Fellowship Program</i>	15
<i>Understanding Key Complaints by Albany's 17 Working Families</i>	
Our Demands	18
What is Next for Us	19



No one's light bill should be higher than their rent. This is the rallying cry of the movement gaining momentum in Albany and across Southwest Georgia to organize for lower light bills.

Every month, many families who receive utility bills for \$400, \$600, or \$800 have to choose between paying to keep their lights on, or paying for their groceries or medicine. Albany goes by the slogan "Good Life City," but in a city where a third of the population lives in poverty, light bills are one of the consistent taxes that keep people trapped in a cycle of poverty they can't break out of, and keeps them from living a good life.

That's why 9to5 Georgia is picking a fight.

What is 9to5?

9to5 Georgia, a founding member of the Albany Coalition to Lower Utility Bills with Black Voters Matter and SOWEGA Rising, is a statewide chapter of 9to5, National Association of Working Women. It was founded originally in 1973 by women office workers who organized to combat discrimination, harassment, and unequal pay. Today, 9to5 is building a movement to achieve economic justice by engaging directly affected women — in particular, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) — to win justice and change through a racial and gender justice lens.

9to5 believes that every person and every family has the right to affordable, accessible, healthy, and community-controlled energy. Yet, too many families have to make the hard choices between keeping the lights on or buying groceries.

9to5 Georgia compiled this report with activists from different organizations in Albany and throughout Georgia to explore the critical question: "Why are the light bills so damn high?" This report outlines the layers of complexity around the monopoly of energy, local and state governance challenges, poor housing conditions, and climate disasters that have left residents in significantly high debt with water, gas, and light services.

The report also highlights the movement and people taking on the fight, especially women with 9to5 Georgia's Utilities Justice Fellowship program, and the policies and changes they are advocating for.

What is Utilities Justice?

In 2016, Nobody Leaves Mid-Hudson, a New York grassroots organization part of the Right to the City Alliance, published a Just Utilities report to highlight the energy burden facing people in Poughkeepsie, New York, with a focus on racial and income disparities. They define utility justice as **the right to have affordable, accessible, healthy, and community-controlled energy.**

The power outages in Texas in the wake of a winter storm in February 2021 and the ensuing light bills residents received highlighted further the energy crisis facing the South and the country at large. These events emphasized the need for a national conversation about power, regulation, and utility justice.¹

In Georgia, we see the disproportionate impact on communities of color, and specifically Black communities, that the current system of energy has in Albany, and how it directly affects other issues such as healthcare, education, family, and housing stability.

How did we get here?

Albany, the seat of Dougherty County, is the economic, cultural, and metropolitan hub of Southwest Georgia. A rural city at the heart of the Blackbelt, Albany has a deep, rich, and layered history. Surrounded by plantations and cotton fields, the city has been a site of intense and ongoing violence against Black and Indigenous folks, and also the stage for pivotal uprisings and movements for freedom and justice that shaped the broader movement for civil rights.



“How curious a land is this, — how full of untold story, of tragedy and laughter, and the rich legacy of human life; shadowed with a tragic past, and big with future promise! This is the Black Belt of Georgia. Dougherty County is the west end of the Black Belt, and men once called it the Egypt of the Confederacy.”

- W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folks

However, similar to many small cities, Albany has experienced climate disasters, a decline in industry and middle-class jobs, and population decrease. Despite the city's resources and development compared to the region, today residents of Albany experience high poverty and crime rates, poor housing conditions, lack of economic opportunity, limited access to healthcare and healthy food, and deep racial tension that fuels and shapes socioeconomic issues.

¹ Ross Ramsey, Analysis: After statewide power outages, Texas lawmakers reconsider an ounce of prevention, The Texas Tribune, March 31, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/03/31/texas-legislature-electric-grid-winter/>

ALBANY'S POPULATION ^{2,3,4,5,6}

There is a population of **73,179** people, **30%** living in poverty and over **65%** are low to moderate income.



\$17,064
Median
Household
Income

\$28,303
Average
Household
Income



60% +
Rent their
home

60% of
homes built
before 1980

72% of
homes
in South
Albany built
before 1980



27%
Lack
access to
healthy
affordable
food

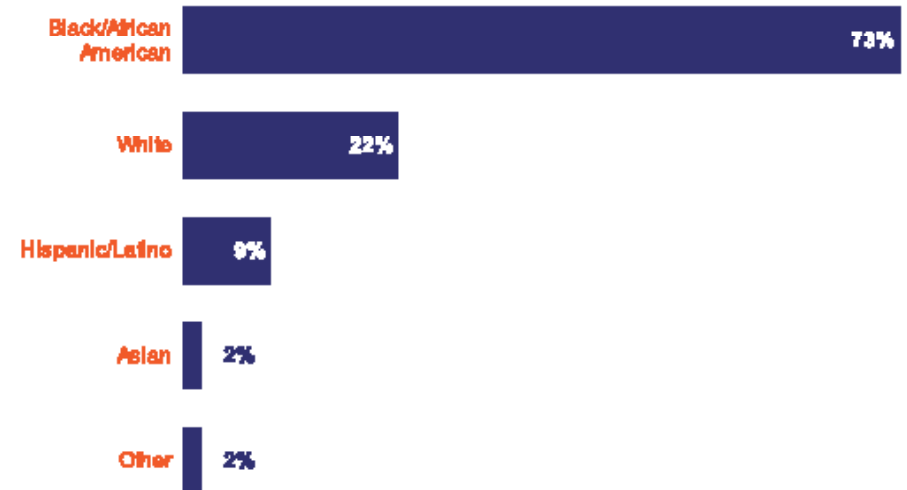
Dougherty
County is #1
in the state
for food
insecurity



66% of
families in
poverty are
women-led
households

So why are the light bills so high?

High light bills are a nationwide issue, often referred to as energy burden. According to the Climate Reality Project,⁷ energy burden is **the percentage of income that goes to all household energy costs such as electricity, heating, etc.** Households with less income tend to have higher energy burdens due to poor housing conditions, and the area where a person resides can significantly impact one's energy burden as well. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines an energy burden above 6% as unaffordable, and in Georgia, the average energy burden on low income households is around 10%.



2 Albany, GA Real Estates & Demographic Data, <https://www.neighborhoodscout.com/ga/albany>, (accessed March 28, 2021).

3 A Poverty Analysis for Albany, Georgia, June 2010 Final Report, <https://www.albanyga.gov/home/showpublisheddocument?id=2115>, (accessed April 6, 2021).

4 East Albany Revitalization Plan, November 2017, <https://www.albanyga.gov/home/showpublisheddocument?id=3537>, (accessed April 6, 2021).

5 Albany, Georgia (GA) Poverty Rate Data, <https://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-Albany-Georgia.html>, (accessed April 6, 2021).

6 Seeding Food Justice: Community-Led Practices for Local Government Policy in Dougherty County, Georgia, <http://bap-home.net/gfc/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/10/Dougherty-Final.pdf>, (accessed April 6, 2021)

7 Climate Reality Project, <https://www.climateRealityProject.org/>, (accessed March 28, 2021).

According to the U.S. Department of Energy⁸, the national average energy burden for low-income households is 8.6% — 3x higher than for non-low-income households. This means that the poorest families are spending much more of their incomes on energy bills than families with more financial resources.

According to the National Resource Defense Council⁹, low-income households in the Southeast and Appalachia have the highest energy burdens — African-American households in the U.S. experience a median energy burden 64% greater than white households. Latinx households have a median burden 24% greater than white households

There are four main components of the utilities crisis in Albany that contribute to the energy burden facing residents: **1) the monopoly of energy, 2) challenges with local and state governance and accountability, 3) poor housing conditions, and 4) climate change.**

Monopoly of Energy

Let's start with a power map. There are three major players in the utilities crisis in Georgia: Georgia Power, MEAG, and Albany Utilities.

Georgia Power, a private company, is a large provider for energy in Georgia. However, several cities and towns receive their power from Georgia Power through a third party entity, like their municipality or an electric membership cooperative (EMC)¹⁰.

Albany has a municipal utility, which means that Albany Utilities — the provider of water, gas, and electric services — is run by the local government and under the leadership of the City of Albany and the City Commission. The City of Albany receives power from Georgia Power with a third party entity — MEAG (Municipal Electric Authority of Georgia).

Most Albany residents receive their energy from Albany Utilities, however a small percentage receive their energy from other companies.

Ultimately, much power comes from Georgia Power, which is a subsidiary of Southern Company. Southern Company is an energy company that is responsible for providing energy for 9 million people throughout the South, through Georgia Power, Alabama Power, Mississippi Power, and others. They are a major corporation that invests significant resources in lobbying; Southern Company spent almost \$2 million in donations to political candidates and campaigns in 2020, and spent more than \$12 million on lobbying in 2019 on legislation pertaining to energy.¹¹

8 Low-Income Community Energy Solutions, <https://www.energy.gov/eere/slsc/low-income-community-energy-solutions>, (accessed 23 March 2021).

9 Study Highlights Energy Burden for Households and How Energy Efficiency Can Help, <https://www.nrdc.org/experts/khalil-shahyd/study-highlights-energy-burden-households-and-how-energy-efficiency-can-help>, (accessed 23, March 2021).

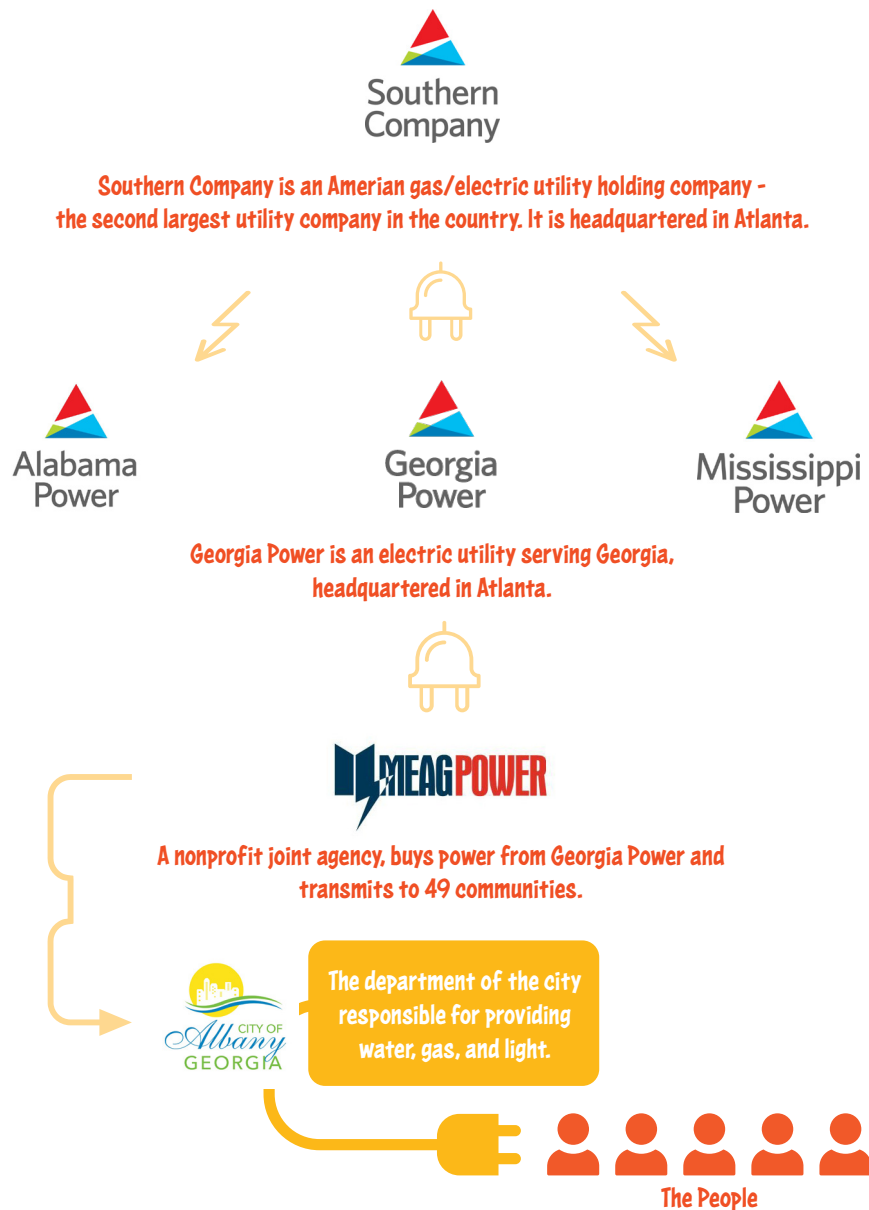
10 An EMC is a member-owned not-for-profit utility. In Georgia, EMC's serve around 4.4 million residents and cover 73% of the state's land area.

11 Southern Co, Center for Responsive Politics, <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/southern-co/summary?id=D000000168>, (accessed April 3, 2021).



POWER MAP

The flow of energy to Albany



Southern Company has traditionally resisted federal environmental regulation.¹² Stephen Smith, executive director of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, shared with the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, “Southern tends to stake out what I would call the worst of the¹³ environmental positions generally. Therefore they tend to represent the sort of retro, laggard end of the spectrum.”

So, why does Albany get its power from MEAG? In 1975, the Georgia Assembly created MEAG to collectively buy power from an open market on behalf of 49 cities and counties who were struggling to get access to the market. MEAG buys power from Georgia Power and then sells the power to each individual city and county. The City of Albany is MEAG’s second largest buyer and has been in a contract with MEAG since the late 1970s which has been renewed into the 2050s.

The contract functions like a car note; MEAG provides Albany Utilities with energy, and in return Albany Utilities has a set amount that it needs to pay. Whatever revenue Albany Utility receives from people paying their light bills has to be enough to reach the amount owed to MEAG each month. According to budget documents¹⁴ and articles,¹¹ the City pays MEAG approximately **\$80 million each year for the cost and distribution of power**. That cost is then transferred to the customers of Albany Utilities.

Former Albany City Manager, Tom Berry, who is considered one of the state’s top experts on utilities management, shared in the Albany Herald, “I think the power of those sales contracts are pretty much ironclad. Pretty much every commission in Albany since 1974 has voted in some version of a contract that expanded the obligation to MEAG.¹⁵ That’s

¹² Bob Sussman, Southern Company’s Attack on the Clean Power Plan: Some Important Unanswered Questions, Brookings, December 17, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/planetpolicy/2014/12/17/southern-companys-attack-on-the-clean-power-plan-some-important-unanswered-questions/>

¹³ Mary Green, Albany Utilities board recommends rate increases, Fox 31, April 26, 2017, <https://wfxl.com/news/local/albany-utilities-board-recommends-rate-increases>

¹⁴ City Manager’s Proposed Budget in Brief Fiscal Year 2020, <https://www.albanyga.gov/Home/ShowDocument?id=5729>, (accessed April 3, 2021)

¹⁵ Carlton Fletcher, Hubbard: Campaign utilities promises are misleading, Albany Herald, December 3, 2020, https://www.albanyherald.com/news/hubbard-campaign-utilities-promises-are-misleading/article_849c8666-fa75-11e9-86b7-eb71d0d8b954.html

why, I think, these agreements are virtually impossible to break if anyone were thinking about leaving MEAG. You can't walk away with an obligation of hundreds of millions of dollars.”

The City of Albany is also in contracts with Plant Vogtle, a nuclear power plant project of Georgia Power, which is set to last until 2056. The joint project between Georgia Power and municipal utilities is already billions of dollars over budget and years behind schedule. The costs of the delays are expected to be factored into monthly electric bills for Georgia Power customers, and other electric providers' customers (including Albany).¹⁶

These contracts and their financial burden ultimately shackle cities' ability to implement policies that would benefit the majority of residents.

“Policies that would be good for people- fixed utility rates for seniors and people on fixed incomes – means we get less revenue, and at the end of the day, we have to pay MEAG.”

- City official in meeting

Additionally, even though leaders have come out publicly about how the arrangement with MEAG has been detrimental, there is fear among officials that any action the city could take would risk legal challenges.

Jacksonville Electric Authority in Florida entered into a contract with MEAG, a part owner of Plant Vogtle, in 2008 in order to purchase nuclear energy. Vogtle's delays and construction debts became too much for the city, and JEA sued MEAG to contest the contract. Ultimately, MEAG countersued, JEA's legal expenses reached almost \$10 million, and both parties settled with the agreement that JEA would continue to honor the 20 year contract.¹⁷

¹⁶ Matt Kemper, Georgia Vogtle nuclear report: more delays, \$1B in extra costs, flaws, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, June 8, 2020, <https://www.ajc.com/news/local/georgia-vogtle-nuclear-report-more-delays-extra-costs-flaws/mBxlgXiDcf0SIaTFR0cZXL/>

¹⁷ Mike Mendenhall, JEA, city settle nuclear Plant Vogtle lawsuit with MEAG, Jax Daily Record, July 30, 2020, <https://www.jaxdailyrecord.com/article/jea-city-settle-nuclear-plant-vogtle-lawsuit-with-meag>

Challenges with Local and State Accountability and Governance

Government is meant to be a mechanism of accountability; however, on both the local and state level, contracts have limited the City of Albany's ability to make decisions about what energy rates and policies work best for its residents, or been directly lobbied to adopt policies that work against residents.

On the local level, Albany Utilities is governed by a five member board, chaired by the Mayor, whose members are appointed by the City Commission. The board meets twice a month at 8:30 a.m. There is usually little public input because the meeting time is not convenient for community members. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings were held behind closed doors with little communication to the public. Since the pandemic, meetings have begun to be livestreamed.

While the board is a governing board and meant to function simultaneously as community oversight, there is little initiative from members to advocate for changes that would benefit working and poor people, and there is immense frustration from community members at leaders who voted to continue contracts with MEAG and Plant Vogtle without community input or foresight.

“In 2056, my newborn son will be my age now, 36 years old. He'll still be paying these kinds of high light bills.”

-9to5 Utilities Justice Fellow Nikki Owens to the City Commission

Because the board is appointed by the City Commission, and because Albany Utilities is administratively run by the City Manager who is also appointed by the City Commission, City Commissioners have the ultimate power to set local policies and direct Albany Utilities.

While utilities reform has been a key component of several City Commission campaigns and platforms, ultimately, leaders come into

office and are stalled against long-lasting contracts, and state policies.

On the state level, the regulatory body for utilities is the Public Service Commission (PSC), a statewide elected body of five commissioners who are responsible for ensuring that all consumers in Georgia receive safe, reliable, and reasonably priced electric, natural gas, and telecommunications services. The PSC has the power to regulate Georgia Power, set rates, add fees, and provide oversight. However, executives from Georgia Power and Southern Company are frequent campaign contributors to commissioners. In the past, commissioners have taken up to 70% of their campaign contributions from entities that profit from PSC decisions.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Georgia Power also donates consistently to campaigns for Georgia lawmakers, and has also contributed to Georgia legislators sponsoring the recently passed Jim Crow 2.0 voter suppression legislation.¹⁹

The control of a handful of entities stifle progressive lawmakers who want to reform utilities and energy policy, and also confuse people in the community 9to5 members and others who have called the PSC to discuss utility issues are redirected to their local utility boards, and local utility board and city officials direct members back to the state or say that there is nothing they can do.

Additionally, because the City of Albany has a high rental rate and a shrinking tax digest and there's been a trend of decline in industry and population, the City is more reliant on and protective of the revenue it gets each month from utility bills. This places the cost burden of running the city on average working and poor residents, instead of corporations and those with wealth.

The profound lack of accountability mechanisms in local government contributes to the utility crisis. At the state level, a consumer utility

counsel under the governor's office of consumer protection served citizens by representing and advocating for consumers in front of the PSC. Unfortunately, the office was defunded in 2008, dissolving the council.

At the local level, accountability for mistakes and issues with utility bills falls to the customer service arm of Albany Utilities, and community members often receive no response or resolution unless a City Commissioner gets involved and pushes for some resolution.²⁰

The lack of accountability has ultimately led to three things: utility bills that essentially function as a poverty tax, decades-long contracts with entities that shackle community control, and a system where Georgia Power, MEAG, and Albany Utilities have unchecked political power to make decisions about residents' utility rates.



These images depict the conditions in some of the homes in Albany.

¹⁸ Kristi Swartz, Donors have stake in PSC decisions, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, August 10, 2012, <https://www.ajc.com/news/local/donors-have-stake-psc-decisions/ztFWBx-RTvJHg3gYjoYSMO/>

¹⁹ Brady Watson, Southern Company and Georgia Power are funding politicians sponsoring voter suppression efforts. We're fighting back, Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, March 23, 2021, <https://cleanenergy.org/blog/southern-company-and-georgia-power-are-funding-voter-suppression-efforts-were-fighting-back/>

²⁰ Marilyn Parker, Coalition aims to help lower Albany utility bills, WAB News 10, July 26, 2019, <https://www.walb.com/2019/07/26/coalition-aims-help-lower-albany-utility-bills/>

Poor Housing Conditions

However, a major component of the utilities crisis in Albany is not just the source of energy, but also the quality of housing available. Most of Albany's housing, especially in South and East Albany, was built well before 1980, and is energy inefficient. Much of the property is dilapidated and blighted, and the majority of the city residents are tenants, many of whom rent from slumlords.

"Now only the Black tenant remains; but the shadow-hand of the master's grand-nephew or cousin or creditor stretches out of the gray distance to collect the rack-rent remorselessly, and so the land is uncared-for and poor. Only black tenants can stand such a system, and they only because they must."

- W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*

Today in 2021, landlords have a free license to rent out property without investing resources to make it habitable. Poor insulation, ventilation, aging appliances, inefficient HVAC systems, and other issues contribute to high light bills, especially for lower income households who cannot afford to repair the properties and have landlords who do not invest in keeping their properties up to standards of code enforcement.

Because many of these tenants have landlords who are absentee, negligent, and more concerned with profit, renters get stuck paying for the energy inefficiency with their light bills.

Statistics ²¹

60% of Albany residents rent their homes

Renters in Albany are:



68%
Black



73%
Latinx



34%
White

64% of housing stock is at elevated risk for lead hazard exposure.

67% of renters spend more than 1/3 of their income on housing and energy costs.

38% of renters spend more than half of their income on housing and energy costs.

11% of the housing in Albany was built after 2000 according to a City analysis of impediments to fair housing choices according to a City analysis of impediments to fair housing choices.

²¹ 2016-2021 Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice, City of Albany, <https://www.albanyga.gov/home/showdocument?id=2105>, (accessed April 7, 2021).

The City has attempted to address this issue through a Weatherization Assistance Program, but it is not funded enough to meet the scale of the crisis. In 2016, the City of Albany weatherized 52 homes, at a cost of \$294,519. In 2020 before the pandemic, the City had weatherized 6 homes. Only those 62 years and older qualify for the program, and those who rent must receive permission from the homeowner.

Many of the slumlords do not invest because it hurts their profit, and corporate slumlords, like Strategic Management Partners, own multiple apartment complexes where properties are so poorly maintained that there are consistent pipe bursts and sewage leaks, septic waste spills and leaks into people's bathtubs, hollowed out windows, Black mold, bug infestation, inconsistent rental rates and late fees, and more.

City officials have expressed frustration privately and publicly with this dynamic. In a townhall, former Assistant City Manager Stephen Collier said slumlords were a major force behind high light bills, and that landlords needed to be regulated, but there was little the City could do.

Previous efforts to regulate landlords at the local level were stymied by state representatives who were landlords and had close ties to landlords, an issue across the state. Because Georgia is a preemption state when it comes to housing, policies like creating a landlord inventory or rental registry, which would allow the City to step in and penalize landlords by not allowing them to rent out property, is nullified by state law.

All of this impacts residents the most- tenants aren't able to hold their landlords accountable, and they have to pay for the poor maintenance in their light bill. Oftentimes, because there are few housing options to begin with across Southwest Georgia, tenants are forced to endure unlivable situations, harassment, and abuse.

"I had to take a second job because there was a pipe leak in my apartment, my landlord wouldn't fix it, and my light bill was \$500."

- Resident of Treeside Park Apartments

Climate and Energy

The utilities crisis is also shaped by climate and energy policy in several ways. Ultimately, the crisis comes down to a fundamental question of who controls energy in Albany, and what kind of energy best serves the community. Additionally, light bills and housing are often impacted by climate disasters, which Albany has experienced a lot of.

In 1994 and 1998, Albany experienced "500 year floods" – floods that have one in 500 chance of happening- that took 31 lives, destroyed homes and buildings, and created more than 40,000 flood refugees.²² South Albany was hit particularly hard, and the rainfall caused the Flint River to rise up and engulf the bridge and break dams, flooding and destroying churches, business, and homes.

In January 2017, tornadoes moved across Albany causing significant damage in communities who were already struggling with high light bills, destroying buildings, infrastructure, and resulting in deaths and injuries.²³

After Hurricane Ivan and smaller storms, Hurricane Michael ravaged Albany in 2018 and left even more damage, with more than 90% of Albany Utilities' customers left without power. The hurricane disabled 49 of the 52 electrical circuits on Albany Utilities' grid, and caused outages to the city's already poor sanitary and stormwater sewer systems, creating additional environmental concerns for residents.²⁴

²² WALB News Team and Grasson Passmore, 25 years later: WALB remembers the Flood of '94, WALB News 10, July 3, 2019, <https://www.walb.com/2019/07/03/years-later-walb-remembers-flood/>

²³

²⁴ Carlton Fletcher, Utilities again a major concern in aftermath of Hurricane Michael, Albany Herald, October 11, 2018, <https://www.albanyherald.com/news/local/utilities-again-a-major-concern-in-aftermath-of-hurricane-michael/>



Yet, some still continued to receive light bills, despite the fact that it took weeks to get power back on, and it took many residents a year or longer to get their homes and roofs repaired.²⁵

“We know that the people in our community are hurting,” former City Manager Sharon Subadan said in a news article in 2018.²⁶ “But we also have to remember that the operation of the city is a business. And as a business, we have a responsibility to pay our bills, just like our citizens do. We have to pay our bills to MEAG to keep the city’s lights on as well.”

²⁵ Grason Passmore, Storm damage post-Michael still plagues an Albany homeowner, WALB News 10, October 7, 2019, <https://www.walb.com/2019/10/07/storm-damage-post-michael-still-plagues-an-albany-home/>

²⁶ Carlton Fletcher, Albany Utilities announces post-Michael billing plan, Albany Herald, October 24, 2018, <https://www.albanyherald.com/news/local/albany-utilities-announces-post-michael-billing-plan/>

²⁷ Alan Mauldin, Massive solar farm in east Dougherty County goes online, Albany Herald, November 18, 2029, <https://www.albanyherald.com/news/massive-solar-farm-in-east-dougherty-county-goes-online/>

²⁸ Green New Deal Resources, <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/gnd-resources/?ms=GreenNewDealResources>, (accessed March 29, 2021)

As climate change worsens, disasters increase for residents, and profits increase for corporate executives, the need for communities to fight climate change and control their own communities has become more clear and urgent.²⁷ Large scale government programs like The Green New Deal,²⁸ which meet the moment of crisis, are imperative for rural communities who are struggling with layers of issues. Bold action on climate change, economic, and racial justice is necessary. Legislation and public investment that would create jobs, develop alternative energy sources, and take specific steps on climate that would reduce disasters and stop the increase of climate refugees would impact residents of Albany and Southwest Georgia directly.

In short, light bills are high in Albany because of the privatized and unregulated energy sector in Georgia.

- **Utility providers monopolize energy and the lack of alternative energy options forces people to rely on few utility providers, who have unchecked power**
- **Cities and towns-especially those in rural areas-get stuck in one-sided contracts that financially burden them, but leave them with no choice but to meet their financial obligations in order to get energy.**
- **Oftentimes, the cost gets passed down to the residents who are billed every month for electric, water, and other services and fees which are not always transparent**
- **Poor housing conditions and the power and prevalence of slumlords contribute to high light bills because homes are not energy efficient**
- **The role of money in politics makes it difficult for everyday people to hold their leaders accountable, and both utility companies and big slumlords invest significantly in donating to lawmakers at the expense of everyday residents.**

What is the movement doing?

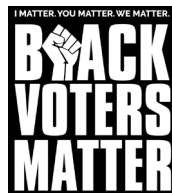
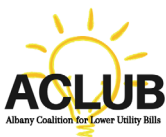
In 2017, 9to5 Georgia identified high light bills as one of the most pervasive issues facing women and working families. 9to5 mobilized quickly to join together with people who had been organizing on high light bills for decades, Black Voters Matter, who had been organizing across the state and in Albany on several issues, and SOWEGA Rising, a local power building organization taking on issues across the region.

Albany Coalition to Lower Utility Bills

9to5 Georgia, together with Black Voters Matter, SOWEGA Rising, and other advocates co-founded the Albany Coalition to Lower Utility Bills (ACLUB) to address the crisis and identify the root issues, and began meeting with city officials, community members, and other advocates.

Black Voters Matter provided deep thought partnership and support to organizations doing Get Out the Vote (GOTV) work during local elections to bring awareness and organize on high light bills, and provided resources to amplify residents' experiences. In 2019, Demetrius Young, a progressive advocate, was elected to the City Commission to represent the Southside, in part because of the frustration with the status quo on utility bills. Incumbent Mayor Dorothy Hubbard who was running for reelection published an op-ed expressing things would stay the same, and she lost.²⁹

ACLUB hosted community meetings, protests, and pushed the utilities board to become more transparent and community-oriented, and worked with 9to5 Georgia to launch the first cohort of the Utilities Justice Fellowship program.



²⁹ Carlton Fletcher, Hubbard: Campaign utilities promises are misleading, Albany Herald, October 29, 2019, https://www.albanyherald.com/news/hubbard-campaign-utilities-promises-are-misleading/article_849c8666-fa75-11e9-86b7-eb71d0d8b954.html



Utilities Justice Fellowship Program

9to5's Community Justice Fellowship Program (CJFP) provides a 12 week, stipend-supported (\$15/hr), on-the-job organizer training program for directly-affected leaders. In Albany, the program is directly responding to the utility crisis. The program trains active, grassroots members to build power through outreach and recruitment; to engage in grassroots organizing; to develop and execute campaign strategies; to develop effective messaging and gain media skills for issue campaigns; and to engage in policy level advocacy to advance economic justice for women.

No family should choose between paying utilities and going to the doctor or risk eviction from their home, or experience losing their kids because their lights are cut off. Albany's utilities crisis is a threat facing the working class and poor communities, which are disproportionately Black women.

³⁰ Marilyn Parker, "Coalition aims to help lower Albany utility bills." WALB News 10, July 26, 2019, <https://www.walb.com/2019/07/26/coalition-aims-help-lower-albany-utility-bills/>
³¹ Samantha Cook, "Ongoing struggle with Albany Utilities' high light bill leads to more protests." South GA Television, September 1, 2020, <https://www.southgatv.com/ongoing-struggle-with-albany-utilities-high-light-bills-leads-to-more-protests>

"I was out of my home for three months because my light bill was so high. It was close to \$2,000 something dollars."

- J. Edwards³⁰

"Just help us out. The utilities are higher than the rent most months."

- Albany resident, petition to Albany Utilities

"My bill went from \$100-\$120 to \$345-\$388 since March!

This is ridiculous for a 600 sq foot apartment."

- Albany resident, comment on South GA Television article³¹

9to5 Georgia's first cohort, a small team of women, began to protest in front of Albany Utilities and submit a petition about the high bills and shut-offs that were happening during the pandemic.

As a result of the pressure created by the fellows through their protests, petitions, and subsequent meetings with city officials, the city adopted

two major reforms to address the utilities crisis. The city allocated funds for the [Energy Conservation Loan Program](#) that assists residents to weatherize their homes and implemented the [Know B4 You Move](#) policy, which allows residents to check the average light bill before moving in.

The 9to5 fellowship program not only empowered women to fight for utilities justice, but also led them to new opportunities including working for partner organizations like Black Voters Matter, leading GOTV efforts in the 2020 election, and advocating on other issues. The program is centered on leadership development. The four fellows in the first cohort used the skills and knowledge learned to help the next cohort become more successful and impactful community leaders. The women are now co-leading and co-facilitating this year's program with a cohort of 10 fellows. Ultimately, the fellows will be able to run their own programs working on other issues that impact their lives in the future. This is what Power Building on the ground looks like.

The 9to5 Utilities Justice Fellowship Program is a fellowship designed for women in Albany and Southwest Georgia with high utility bills to educate, train, and organize for economic justice. Each cohort goes through a 12 week training that covers economic, racial, and gender justice, break down the utilities and housing crisis, develop leadership and organizing skills, and introduce fellows to local politics. Fellows are responsible for organizing actions that move Albany closer to utilities justice. This includes protests, meetings with city leaders, and other actions. Fellows have gone on to work for Black Voters Matter, lead canvassing in the 2020 election, and advocate on other issues.



Understanding the Key Complaints by Albany's Working Families

Over the course of hundreds of conversations with community members and leaders through ACLUB, activists compiled the following complaints.

1. Utility bills are high and the reasons do not make sense.

"We [are] paying late on a lot of other stuff because we can't do anything but pay utilities. I've had audit after audit after audit and they find nothing wrong."

- Felichia Bailey³²

"My June payment was \$683, then my July payment was \$747 and my current payment is \$861 and I have not changed anything. If anything, I have conserved even more."

-Tricia Moreschi³³

"They turned my lights off this morning. The only income I have is social security and my son's SSI benefits. My bill has been at \$1000 which I paid just two months ago. This is so hurtful, they cut off right in the middle of my son school lesson on zoom."

- Albany resident, comment to ACLUB

"How [are] my light bill be higher than my rent each month? Especially being on fixed income."

Albany resident, comment to ACLUB

"I need help with an \$808 light bill. It was \$600 last month, and I live in a trailer."

- Albany resident, comment to ACLUB

"My light bill is \$823 for one month."

- Albany resident, comment to ACLUB

2. Communities suffer the most from locked contracts with MEAG and Plant Vogtle.

3. The City has been negligent causing undue hardships through mistakes, mismanagement, and cutting people's lights off.

4. There is a lack of clarity on what is being billed, and how billing works.

5. There is not accountability of landlords to ensure adequate, energy efficient housing.

6. Where did the MEAG money go?

Why didn't we see any of that money? 77 million isn't a small amount- and the people never saw any of it.

- ACLUB Member



32 Marilyn Parker, Albany woman forced to pay over \$700 utility bill, WALB News 10, July 16, 2018, <https://www.walb.com/story/38658133/albany-woman-forced-to-pay-over-700-utility-bill/>

33 Albany resident angry about high utility bills, WALB News 10, August 14, 2018, <https://www.walb.com/story/38824035/albany-resident-angry-about-high-utility-bills/>



Our Demands

The good news is that we know more about the utilities crisis in Albany than ever before. What is making a difference is that community members have been part of the conversation and part of the solution. When that happens, we are closer to fixing this problem.

9to5 Georgia believes that the following steps are necessary for any long-term systemic change:

1. Establish a Utilities Justice Taskforce

The Utilities Justice Taskforce would consist of activists, community members, elected officials, utilities management and City staff, and other stakeholders who can further explore utilities reforms and policy changes that would reduce the cost and determine long-term solutions.

2. Establish Renters Bill of Rights and Utilities Bill of Rights

These bills of rights would protect residents and customers of Albany Utilities and Vogtle from unfair practices by landlords and utilities management. The rights and resources that generations of activists

have fought for should be accessible and clearly explained to all residents and customers.

3. Establish the Office of Sustainability in the City of Albany

The City of Albany should make a commitment to sustainability, climate action and livability. The Office would coordinate across City departments to improve Albany's sustainability practices and develop goals and action plans for climate, environmental and alternative energy sources.

4. Conduct an external audit of Albany Utilities

Albany Utilities must undergo an external utilities audit to determine whether it is providing services in an economical, efficient and effective manner. The external audit will offer opportunities for improvement and strengthening of internal processes.

5. Public Investment in solar energy

Local government must invest more in opportunities for residents to use solar energy which would allow people to have greater control over their energy, reduce costs, and be more energy efficient.

6. Establish public accountability measures

The creation of a consumer protection office at the local level which would advocate for residents and consumers of Albany Utilities in disputes with the utility.

7. Increase taxes on land and inherited wealth

A major reason the utilities crisis persists is due to the lack of alternative income for the local government. Many industries have left, the economy has taken hits, climate disasters have destabilized families' homes, and there is little tax revenue from the small amount of home ownership compared to larger cities. A greater tax on the people with wealth would provide streams of revenue, and also could be redirected to Black and brown communities as much of the old money wealth in Southwest Georgia traces back to plantation-owning families.

8. Adopt a local Green New Deal – an investment in creating jobs and building new energy efficient housing

Albany, like the rest of the country, needs bold progressive change that addresses the climate and energy crisis, the housing crisis, and the jobs crisis facing the city. A comprehensive jobs program would provide on-the-job training and livable wages for folks to weatherize homes, build new homes, and restore the environment, would help stabilize the economy and address the utilities crisis.

What is Next for Us

As the 9to5 Utilities Justice Fellowship program expands, we are beginning to train and encourage members to run for office so they can write the legislation and create the policies we need to undo decades of damage.

To our 9to5 members and the community, we stand with you. The collective power of your time and hearts has fueled this work and we join you as you continue advocating for utilities justice. No one's light bill should be higher than their rent. Everyone deserves a livable home.

To our donors and funders, we invite you to continue working with us to make utilities justice a reality. Together, we are building a movement filled with policy wins and community empowerment. Our immediate goal is to support more organizers/utilities justice fellows and to build out a three year plan that wins on progressive legislation on energy, housing and utilities.

To our colleagues and fellow advocates, we urge you to join us in calling for a nationwide overhaul of energy systems and demanding accountability and energy justice.



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Pinky Modeste, in memoriam, who fought for many years for utilities justice, and to make her community better.



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