Addressing Power Needs in Your Emergency Plan

Updated: January 10, 2024

# Make a list.

Do you use battery-operated communication devices, hearing aids, or mobility equipment? Do you have respiratory devices like a suction or CPAP machine? Does your medication or nutritional formula require refrigeration? Start thinking about all the ways you rely on access to electricity.

## Get spare batteries for any devices that offer them.

One of the simplest ways to keep your equipment running is to make sure you have a backup battery. Sometimes this makes the difference between losing use of an item temporarily (while waiting for it to recharge) or entirely (if the original battery gets damaged).

Tips to make your batteries last longer: removable batteries, including standard AA, should be stored outside of their device when not in use. Use humidity-proof containers and store batteries upright, so their ends don’t touch one another. Appropriate storage extends the lifespan of your batteries and prevents leaks and corrosion. Connect spare wheelchair batteries to a trickle charger or battery maintainer if possible, so that you don’t have the unpleasant surprise of them being dead when you go to use them.

## Figure out how much power you need.

It might be helpful to know how much electricity is needed to run your equipment. The number of “watts” will help you know what size power source you need. Find this information listed on your device. If it only says “Amps” and “volts,” you can use a free power calculator online to translate that into watts.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Item | Amps | Volts | Wattage  (amps x volts = watts) |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |

# Compare possible solutions.

Consider what power sources best fit your environment and the type of devices you want to run.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Product Type** | **How It Works** |
| USB Power Banks | Charge this ahead of time and it will store the energy for you to use later. Many people choose this type of power bank to charge their mobile devices like smartphones, AAC devices, rechargeable flashlights or radios. USB Power Banks can be a good choice to pack in go-bags since they are so small. However, they will only charge technology that comes with a USB cable. |
| High-capacity Lithium-Ion Battery Bank and/or Portable Power Inverters | Charge a battery bank ahead of time and it will store the energy for you to use later. A high-capacity bank might be used to power small appliances like an ice maker, a CPAP machine, or an air filter.  A power inverter can draw energy either from a large battery (like your car battery) or from a generator.  Sometimes these features are combined in one product, such as the Yeti line from [Goal Zero](https://www.goalzero.com/collections/portable-power-stations). |
| Portable Generator | Most generators are powered by gasoline or propane. It’s important to think about how you will store and refill this fuel. You need to pay careful attention to the safety instructions. Generators need adequate ventilation (15’ from house) and have to be unplugged and cooled down before refueling. |
| Whole-House Generator | This solution generates power from natural gas. This system must be professionally installed by an electrician. While it is the most expensive solution, it is the only one that can automatically activate when needed and it is the only solution that allows you to plug your appliances right into their standard wall outlets. |

## Funding these products.

If you participate in a Medicaid waiver, and receive home & community based services, ask your Supports Coordinator about generator coverage! Medicaid can provide a generator for your primary residence. It is important to consider that there is a lifetime limit of $5,000 for generators and this does count against your overall lifetime limit of $10,000 for assistive technology.

* Generators are covered by the CHC and OBRA waivers under the Assistive Technology service. The need for a generator would have to be documented in the participant’s needs assessment.
* Generators to power life-sustaining equipment are covered for participants residing in private homes when the following has been documented: The generator purchased is the most cost-effective to ensure the health and safety of the participant; AND the participant’s health and safety is dependent upon electricity as documented by a physician.

Other ways to fund your power supplies might include using an ABLE savings account or healthcare flexible spending account.

Backup batteries can sometimes be funded during the original purchase of a device. The next time you are eligible for new equipment – such a powerchair or a communication device – ask your care provider about backup power! You might be able to get a spare battery included at that time.

The PA Assistive Technology Foundation also offers several forms of assistance. Their [*Funding Your Assistive Technology*](https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fpatf.us%2Fwho-we-are%2Fpublications%2Ffunding-your-assistive-technology%2F&data=05%7C01%7Ccheyser%40pa.gov%7Cd026bc38e65d42399fc208db9ab296d7%7C418e284101284dd59b6c47fc5a9a1bde%7C0%7C0%7C638273864062083454%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=E8%2Bkf7RDqczAKH%2BPM8hO8DFTcmRF1PmLqjsbkYRn%2FV8%3D&reserved=0) guide lists over 65 funding resources or grants, for which people can apply to get assistance. PATF also offers [financial loans](https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fpatf.us%2Fwhat-we-do%2Ffinancial-loans%2F&data=05%7C01%7Ccheyser%40pa.gov%7Cd026bc38e65d42399fc208db9ab296d7%7C418e284101284dd59b6c47fc5a9a1bde%7C0%7C0%7C638273864062083454%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=1JMLw693thq2BfHBXdSOeSba0hl%2Fc1WJjYitPLhNqcg%3D&reserved=0) for the purchase of assistive technology. Loans up to $7,000 have 0% interest and no fees. For loans over $7,000, the interest rate is 3.75% and no fees.

Backup emergency power sources are not standard items covered in Area Agency on Aging programs, however some Area Agencies on Aging may decide to cover the full or partial cost at their discretion depending on available funding, program eligibility and the specific situation of the individual requesting the item.  Individuals should contact their local [Area Agency on Aging](https://www.aging.pa.gov/local-resources/Pages/AAA.aspx) for more information.

# Make backup plans.

## Declare your disability-specific power needs​.

Let the utility company and the [county emergency management agency](https://www.pema.pa.gov/County-EMC/Pages/default.aspx) know that someone in your house is power dependent. Your electric supplier may prioritize your area for faster restoration of service if you rely on:

* Life-sustaining equipment like respiratory machines​
* Medication or nutritional formulas that require refrigeration​
* Power mobility devices​

## Prepare low-tech backups.

Be prepared with manual alternatives in case an emergency outlasts your power sources, or if more portable tools are needed during transport.

Examples: If you use a powerchair, have a manual wheelchair on hand. If you use a high-tech speech generating device, have a hardcopy communication board ready. If you rely on refrigeration, assemble or invest in a high-efficiency ice chest cooler.