



An Extended Guide · No. 1363

Troubleshooting an ATS That Won't Transfer

Calm first checks when the
switch-over doesn't happen

Tech Made Simple — Service Made Personal

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! Read this first — this is licensed electrician's work

An automatic transfer switch is wired straight into your home's main electrical panel and works hand in hand with a standby generator. That makes installing one a licensed electrician's job from start to finish — almost always with a permit and an inspection — and never a do-it-yourself project. A big part of what the switch does is keep your generator's power from ever backfeeding onto the utility lines, which protects the crews working to bring your power back. Getting that right is exactly why the work belongs to a licensed pro. My job is to help you understand it, choose it, and live with it — not to open your panel. So the checks in this guide are all safe, hands-off ones — anything involving wiring or the panel is a licensed pro's job, never yours.

When the switch-over doesn't happen — stay calm

It's an unsettling moment: the power's out, and your automatic system hasn't kicked in as expected. Take a breath — there are several simple, safe things to check that solve many cases, and this guide walks you through them calmly. It also draws a clear line at what you should never touch.

I'm Bill, and I help folks in Portage County stay calm and safe when tech misbehaves. Most 'it won't transfer' situations come down to a handful of simple causes — and often the system is actually working fine, just waiting out its normal delay. We'll check the easy things first, in order.

The golden rule throughout: every check here is hands-off and safe. The moment troubleshooting would mean opening a panel or touching wiring, you stop and call a pro. Your safety matters far more than a few minutes sooner.

★ Talk it through with me live

If your system won't transfer and you'd like a calm voice walking you through the safe checks, call or text me at (330) 200-8042. Often we sort it out together in minutes.

The whole guide, on one page

If you remember only these things, you'll handle it calmly and safely.

- ❑ First, give it time — the transfer delay means a normal pause of a few seconds before it kicks in.
- ❑ Check that the system is in 'AUTO' mode, not 'OFF' or 'MANUAL' — a common, easy fix.
- ❑ Notice whether the generator started at all — that tells you which kind of problem it is.
- ❑ Look (don't touch) for a tripped breaker, an empty propane tank, or a warning light.
- ❑ Never open the transfer switch or panel, or touch wiring — that's always a pro's job.
- ❑ When in doubt, call your installer or me — and if a medical need is at risk, act on your medical plan.

✓ Often it's simpler than you fear

A great many 'it won't transfer' calls turn out to be a switch left in OFF, a system just finishing its delay, or a tripped breaker. Check the easy things first — they solve most cases.

First, take a breath — and stay safe

A backup that seems not to work is stressful, but panic leads to unsafe shortcuts. Calm and safe is the way.

Before anything, remember two things. First, many apparent failures aren't failures at all — the system may simply be waiting out its normal transfer delay, or be in a mode you can easily fix. Second, no amount of urgency justifies opening a panel or touching wiring; that's how people get hurt. Every safe check in this guide is something you can do without tools and without risk.

If there's a medical need in the home that depends on power, don't wait on troubleshooting — turn to your medical backup plan (battery backups, oxygen tanks, relocation, and 911 if anyone's in distress), which our medical-equipment guide covers. Safety of people always comes before sorting out the machine.

! People before machines, always

If anyone's health depends on power, act on your medical plan first and troubleshoot second. And never let frustration tempt you into opening the panel — that line is never worth crossing.

Check one: has it just not finished waiting?

The most common 'problem' isn't a problem at all — it's the normal transfer delay.

When the power fails, your system deliberately waits a few seconds to confirm the outage is real, then starts the generator and lets it steady before switching your home over. That whole sequence takes a little time. If you're standing in the dark counting seconds, it can feel like nothing's happening when the system is simply being careful, exactly as designed.

So the very first thing to do is give it a moment. Listen for the generator starting outside. If, after a reasonable pause, it starts and your power comes on, there was never a problem — just the normal delay our transfer-delay guide explains in full.

✓ Count to a slow minute

Before deciding it's failed, give it a slow minute — listen for the generator and watch for your power. Often the 'failure' resolves itself as the system finishes its careful startup.

Check two: is it set to AUTO?

This is the single most common easy fix — and it's completely safe to check and set.

Your generator's control usually has a mode setting: AUTO, OFF, and MANUAL. For the system to start and transfer on its own, it must be in AUTO. If it was switched to OFF (perhaps during a service visit, or bumped) or left in MANUAL, it won't respond automatically to an outage. Setting it back to AUTO — a simple switch or button your installer showed you — often solves everything.

This is an owner-level control, not wiring, so it's safe to check and set. If you're not sure which setting is which, that's a great thing to have your installer point out on your walk-through, or for me to show you. Knowing your AUTO switch is one of the most useful bits of owner knowledge there is.

✓ AUTO is the magic word

If your system isn't responding to an outage, the very first thing to confirm is that it's in AUTO. It's astonishing how often that's the whole answer — and it's a completely safe thing to check.

Check three: did the generator even start?

This question splits the problem in two, and points you toward the right next check.

Listen and look: did the generator try to start? If it never attempted to start, the issue is on the starting side — think AUTO mode, the battery, or the controls. If it started and ran but your home never switched over, the issue is on the transfer side — and that's more likely to need a pro. Knowing which it is helps you (and whoever you call) sort it faster.

You don't need to diagnose it precisely — just notice which situation you're in. 'It never started' and 'it's running but my power's still out' are two different stories, and telling them apart is genuinely useful information.

✓ Two different stories

'Didn't start' points to the battery, mode, or controls. 'Started but didn't transfer' points to the switch side. Noticing which you have is half the troubleshooting.

Safe checks if it won't start

If the generator never tried to start, here are the safe, hands-off things to check.

- **Mode:** confirm it's in AUTO, as above — the top suspect.
- **Fuel:** if you're on propane, is the tank empty or the valve closed? A dry tank is a common, simple cause.
- **Battery:** a weak or dead start battery is a leading cause — you can't fix it hands-off, but a warning light or slow crank points to it.
- **Warning light or message:** check the control or app for an alert telling you what's wrong.
- **Cold:** extreme cold can affect starting and propane — another clue, though not a DIY fix.

! Fuel and mode you can check; the rest, note and call

You can safely confirm the mode and, for propane, the tank and valve. A battery, a cold-weather issue, or a warning light you note and report — you don't fix those yourself. Noting them helps the pro.

Safe checks if it runs but won't transfer

If the generator is running but your home is still dark, here's the safe picture.

First, give it the transfer delay — it may still be steadying before it switches you over. Confirm it's in AUTO. Beyond that, a generator that runs but won't transfer usually points to something on the switch or control side — and that's where safe owner checks end. You should not open the transfer switch, poke at controls beyond the AUTO setting, or touch any wiring to investigate.

This is a 'note it and call' situation. Tell your installer the generator runs but the transfer isn't happening — that's valuable information that helps them help you quickly. Our warning-signs guide covers reading the clues, but the fix here belongs to a pro.

! Running-but-not-transferring: call a pro

A generator that runs but won't transfer is beyond safe owner troubleshooting. Confirm AUTO, give it the delay, then call your installer — don't open the switch to investigate.

Two kinds of homes, two sets of needs

Calm, safe troubleshooting is the same everywhere, but your situation — how far help is, and what's at stake — differs between town and country.

If you live in town or the suburbs

In town or the suburbs, outages are often shorter and help is closer, so even if the system won't transfer, you're less likely to be stranded long. Run the safe checks, and if it's beyond them, a pro can usually reach you before too long.

- Shorter outages mean less pressure while you work through the safe checks.
- Help and a place with power are usually close if you need them.
- City water keeps flowing regardless, so a delay in backup is less urgent.
- Still, never let closeness of help tempt you into unsafe DIY shortcuts.

If you are out in the country on a well

Out in the country, a backup that won't transfer is more serious — outages run long, the well pump means no water, and help is farther away. The safe checks matter just as much, but so does having a fallback: stored water, a plan for heat, and knowing when to relocate if needed.

- Longer rural outages raise the stakes if backup doesn't transfer — have stored water and a heat fallback.
- The well pump means no water without power, so plan for that possibility.
- Help is farther, so run the safe checks, then call early rather than waiting.
- Never try risky DIY fixes because a pro is far — that's exactly when shortcuts turn dangerous.

★ Stranded and unsure? Call me

If your backup won't transfer and you're not sure what's safe to try, call me at (330) 200-8042. We'll work the safe checks together and get a pro moving if needed.

The safe checklist — what you CAN do

Here, in one place, is the whole of safe owner troubleshooting.

- ☐ Give it time — allow the normal transfer delay to finish.
- ☐ Confirm the system is in AUTO mode.
- ☐ Notice whether the generator started or not.
- ☐ For propane: check the tank isn't empty and the valve is open.
- ☐ Look (don't touch) at the control or app for a warning light or message.
- ☐ Note what you observe, to tell your installer or me.

✓ That's the whole safe list

If you've done these and it still won't transfer, you've reached the end of safe owner troubleshooting — and done it exactly right. The next step is a phone call, not a screwdriver.

What you must NOT touch

Just as important as the safe checks is a firm, clear list of what to leave strictly alone.

- **The transfer switch's insides:** never open its cover or touch anything within.
- **Your electrical panel:** not the place for troubleshooting, ever.
- **Any wiring:** generator, switch, or panel — all off-limits.
- **The generator's engine internals:** beyond checking fuel and mode, leave it be.
- **A 'suicide cord' or any backfeed shortcut:** deadly and illegal, no matter how desperate the moment.

! Desperation is when shortcuts kill

The dangerous moment is when an outage drags on and frustration builds. That's exactly when people reach for a suicide cord or open a panel — and exactly when it gets someone hurt. Hold the line: call a pro.

Getting through the outage while you wait

If backup won't come and a pro is on the way, here's how to stay safe and comfortable meanwhile.

Treat it as a normal outage for now: keep the fridge and freezer closed to hold the cold, use flashlights (not candles, ideally), dress warmly or keep cool as the season demands, and lean on any stored water if you're on a well. If you have a portable generator as a separate backup, you may use it — outdoors only, well away from the house, through a proper hookup, never a backfeed cord.

The goal is simply to be safe and reasonably comfortable until the automatic system is fixed. Our portable-generator guides cover safe portable use if you go that route, and the same carbon-monoxide rules apply with full force.

! A portable is outdoors only — always

If you fall back to a portable generator, every carbon-monoxide rule applies: outdoors only, well away from the house, exhaust pointed away, never in a garage. A transfer-switch problem never changes that.

If a medical or critical need is at risk

This deserves its own page, because it changes the priorities entirely.

If someone in the home depends on power for a medical device, a backup that won't transfer is not the time for patient troubleshooting — it's the time to act on your medical backup plan. Switch to the device's battery backup, use oxygen backup tanks if applicable, and if backups run low or the person shows any distress, call 911 and move to somewhere with power. Our medical-equipment guide covers this fully.

The machine can wait; a person cannot. Get the person safe and supported first, then deal with the generator. That order is never wrong, and it's exactly why a medical plan should always have layers beyond the generator.

! Act on the medical plan first

If health depends on power and backup won't transfer, don't troubleshoot — go straight to your medical plan: batteries, tanks, relocation, and 911 if anyone's in distress.

Person first, always.

When to call the pro — which is most of the time

For anything beyond the safe checks, the answer is a phone call. Here's when to reach for it.

Call your installer or a licensed electrician if: the generator won't start after you've confirmed AUTO and fuel; it runs but won't transfer; there's a warning light you can't clear; you smell gas or something hot; or you're simply unsure. None of these are failures on your part — they're exactly the situations professionals exist for. A same-day or urgent call is warranted when you're without power and can't resolve it safely.

Keep your installer's number — and mine — somewhere handy, ideally with your system's paperwork, so you're not hunting for it in the dark. Calling early beats struggling long, especially with a long outage or a critical need.

★ Keep my number where you'll find it

Put your installer's number and mine with your system's papers now, while it's calm. When the moment comes, you'll be glad they're a glance away. Reach me at (330) 200-8042.

Repairs are a licensed job, too

Just as the install was licensed work, so is any repair to why it won't transfer.

Whatever's keeping your system from transferring — a control fault, a switch issue, a wiring problem — the fix is a licensed electrician's or qualified technician's job, not a do-it-yourself repair. They diagnose and correct it safely, and confirm the isolation and operation are right afterward. Our install-and-permit guide's principles apply to repairs as much as to the first install.

! A repair is not a DIY moment

However tempting it is to 'just have a look inside,' a transfer problem is diagnosed and repaired by a pro. The insides of the switch and panel are never a safe place for owner troubleshooting.

Safety, briefly

Troubleshooting safely is the whole theme — these truths anchor it.

! The generator still makes carbon monoxide

A standby generator burns fuel, so its exhaust still contains carbon monoxide — an invisible, odorless gas that is dangerous to breathe. Yours lives permanently outdoors, and your installer sets it the manufacturer's required distance from windows, doors, and vents so the exhaust drifts safely away from the house. You never have to place it yourself, but do keep that area clear, never box the unit in or enclose it to quiet it down, and keep tested carbon-monoxide alarms inside the house all the same.

Keep every check hands-off: mode, fuel, and looking at lights are safe; opening anything or touching wiring is not. If you fall back to a portable, respect every carbon-monoxide rule. And if a medical need is involved, people come before the machine, every time.

! The line that keeps you safe

Here's the line to hold: if a check needs a tool, a cover off, or a hand on a wire, it's not yours to do. Everything on the safe side of that line is fine; nothing on the other side is worth the risk.

The common causes, recapped

Most 'won't transfer' situations trace back to this short list.

- **Just the normal delay:** not a fault at all — give it time.
- **Not in AUTO:** the most common easy fix.
- **Empty propane or closed valve:** a simple, checkable cause.
- **A weak or dead battery:** a leading reason it won't start (a pro's fix).
- **A control or switch fault:** when it runs but won't transfer (a pro's fix).

✓ Two you can fix, the rest you report

Of these, you can safely resolve the delay and the AUTO mode, and check propane. The battery and control faults you note and report — and a good installer sorts them quickly.

Questions to ask the pro

When you call, these help the pro help you faster.

Q: Here's what I observed — what does it point to?

Tell them whether it started, whether it's in AUTO, any warning light, and your fuel status. Good observations speed the diagnosis.

Q: Is this something urgent given my situation?

Mention a long outage, a well (no water), or any medical need so they can prioritize appropriately.

Q: What can I safely do while I wait for you?

Ask what's safe — usually just normal outage measures and, if you have one, a properly hooked-up portable outdoors.

Q: How do I prevent this next time?

Once fixed, ask what caused it and how to avoid a repeat — often it's battery care or leaving it in AUTO.

✓ Your observations are gold

The calm notes you took — did it start, is it in AUTO, any warning light — are exactly what a pro needs to help you fast. Troubleshooting safely also means troubleshooting helpfully.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most when a system won't transfer, answered plainly.

Q: My power's out and the generator didn't kick in — what first?

Give it a slow minute for the normal transfer delay, then confirm it's in AUTO mode. Those two account for a great many cases. Then check propane and look for a warning light.

Q: What's the most common easy fix?

The system being in OFF or MANUAL instead of AUTO. Setting it back to AUTO — a safe, owner-level control — often solves it entirely.

Q: The generator's running but my power's still out — what do I do?

Confirm it's in AUTO and give it the transfer delay. If it still won't transfer, that's beyond safe owner checks — call your installer. Don't open the switch to investigate.

Q: Can I open the transfer switch to look inside?

No — never. The insides of the switch and panel are off-limits for owner troubleshooting. Note what you see and call a licensed pro.

Q: What if someone's medical device needs power?

Don't troubleshoot — act on your medical plan: battery backups, oxygen tanks, relocation, and 911 if anyone's in distress. People before the machine, always.

★ Let's work it out together, safely

Call or text me at (330) 200-8042 and I'll walk you calmly through the safe checks — and help get a pro moving if it's beyond them.

What I do to help

A calm voice and a clear line are exactly what a won't-transfer moment calls for.

- **What I help with:** walking you through the safe checks live, helping you tell normal from a real fault, and getting a pro moving when needed.
- **What only a licensed pro does:** open the switch or panel, diagnose wiring or controls, and repair the fault.
- **What I never do:** touch the wiring or panel, or suggest a shortcut — there are none that are safe.

★ A calm voice in a stressful moment

When your backup won't cooperate, a calm walk-through of the safe checks is worth a lot. That's exactly what I'm here for. Reach me at (330) 200-8042.

A calm, safe checklist

Keep this by your system's papers — it's the whole of safe response in order.

- ☐ Breathe. If a medical need is at risk, act on your medical plan first.
- ☐ Give it a slow minute for the normal transfer delay.
- ☐ Confirm the system is in AUTO mode.
- ☐ Note: did the generator start, or not?
- ☐ For propane, check the tank and valve; look for a warning light.
- ☐ Beyond that, don't open anything — call your installer or me.
- ☐ Meanwhile, treat it as a normal outage, safely.

✓ In order, and no further

Work down this list in order, and stop where it says stop. Doing the safe checks and then calling a pro isn't giving up — it's exactly the right, responsible response.

You don't have to do this alone

You just have to remember that a friendly, patient person is one call away.

I hope this guide made troubleshooting a transfer switch that won't transfer feel a little less daunting and a lot more doable. Keep it in a drawer with your other home papers, come back to a page whenever you need it, and don't worry about memorizing anything.

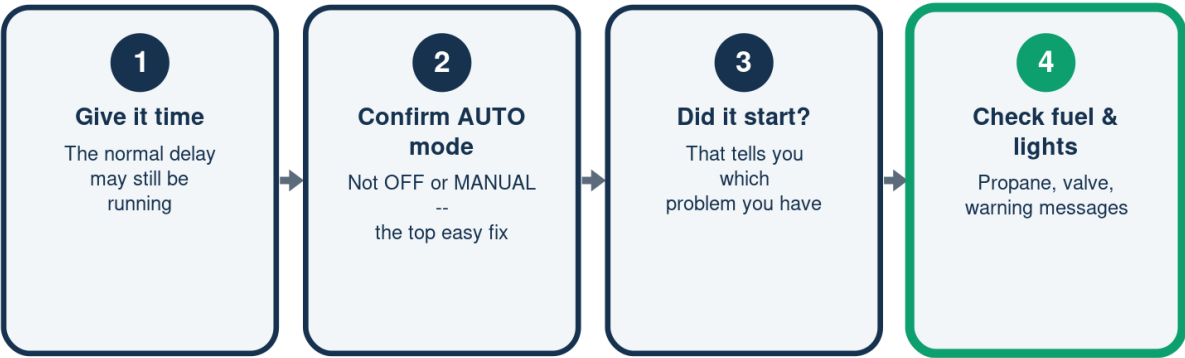
When you'd rather have a hand, that's exactly what I do. I come to your home, work at your pace, and never make you feel rushed or silly for asking. A first visit is a flat \$99, and for the parts that don't need me on-site I can often help right on your screen for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day, come-back-free guarantee. I don't do the licensed electrical or gas work myself — for that I'll help you line up a trustworthy local pro.

★ Bill's Home Tech — real help, close to home

Call or text me at (330) 200-8042, or visit BillsHomeTech.com. Serving Atwater and all of Portage County. 30+ years of patient, plain-English tech help — and if you're ever not 100% happy with a visit, I'll make it right or refund it. That's a promise. — Bill

Safe Checks, in Order

Calm, hands-off, and effective



If these don't solve it, the next step is a call -- not a tool.

Two Different Problems

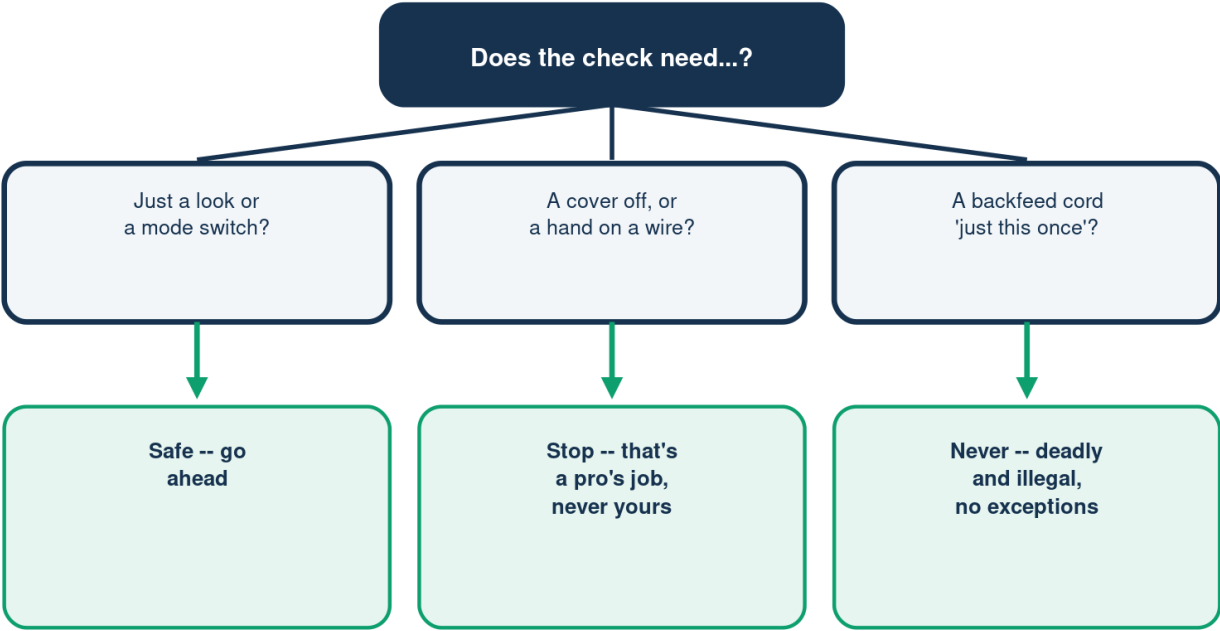
Which one you have points the way

	Didn't start	Ran but won't transfer
Likely	Mode, battery,	fuel
You check	AUTO, propane	AUTO, give it time
You don't	Open anything	Open the switch
Then	Call if unsolved	Call the pro

Noticing which story you're in is half the troubleshooting.

Is This Check Safe to Do?

Hold this line, no matter the pressure



If health depends on power, act on your medical plan first.

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.

While You Wait for the Pro

Stay safe and comfortable meanwhile

	Do	Don't
Food	Keep fridge closed	Open it often
Light	Use flashlights	Risky candles
Portable backup	Outdoors, proper hookup	A backfeed cord
Medical need	Act on your plan	Troubleshoot instead

Treat it as a normal outage until the automatic system is fixed.



Need a Real Person?

You do not have to remember all of it.
You just have to remember you can call.
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Prefer help without a visit?

Bill can screen-share and fix many things remotely — a flat \$49, free for Support Plan members.



A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that comes from using these guides. Thanks for reading, and stay safe out there.

— *Bill*



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