

# **Your Rights as a Residential Gas and Electric Utility Customer**



## **How can the PSC help?**

Prior to contacting the PSC, contact your utility company to try to resolve the problem. If you cannot resolve the problem with your utility company, you may contact the PSC Consumer Affairs Division at 608-266-2001, 1-800-225-7729, or on the web at: <http://psc.wi.gov/consumerInfo/complaints/index-complaints.htm>. A staff member will obtain information from you and the utility company, and try to resolve the issue.

## **Moving?**

If you are planning to buy a home or rent a new apartment, contact your utility for an estimate of the energy costs at the new address. It can provide you with an average of how much energy was used at the new address or the largest and smallest bills during the last 12 months.

## **Service Disconnection or Refusal**

Utility services can be disconnected if you:

- Fail to pay your utility bill
- Fail to comply with a deferred payment agreement
- Tamper with your meter, i.e., self reconnection
- Fail to pay a properly assessed deposit
- Have a safety hazard, i.e., exposed wires, meter socket damage
- Live at an address where the prior customer failed to pay his or her utility bill and continues to reside at that address.
- Fail to provide the utility access to your meter or other utility equipment

A utility must send you a notice before your service is disconnected unless the disconnection is due to a safety hazard or self-reconnection. The disconnection notice must clearly state the reasons for the disconnection, when the disconnection can happen, and how to contact your utility to try to resolve the issue. The dispute procedures must be printed on the disconnection notice. Both you and the utility company must make reasonable attempts to work together to resolve the problem.

## Deposits

Utility companies may require a deposit for service to ensure payment. A standard deposit cannot exceed the sum of the two largest consecutive bills during the last twelve months. A deposit requested due to non-payment during the winter months cannot exceed the four highest consecutive bills during the last twelve months. The following rules apply to payment and refund of deposits:

- **Existing Residential Service:** A standard deposit can be requested if your service was disconnected during the last 12 months for nonpayment of an undisputed account or your initial application was falsified or incomplete. A winter non-payment deposit can be required if you had debt incurred during the winter that was 80 days or more past due and you had the ability to pay.
- **New Residential Service:** A deposit can be requested if you have an unpaid bill for the same type of service anywhere in Wisconsin during the last six years which remains undisputed. A deposit can also be required if there is good reason to believe that you do not intend to, or will be unable to pay your bills at the time payment is due.

For residential service, the deposit will be refunded, with interest, after 12 consecutive months of prompt payment. You do not have to post a deposit if you can document that your income is at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.

## Budget Payment, Installment Plans and Medical Emergencies

To manage high winter gas bills or high summer electric bills, ask your utility about budget billing payment plans. This allows you to average estimated annual use into even monthly payments. Every six months, your payment amount is adjusted to reflect your actual use. At the end of a budget year, your bill is adjusted to correct over-billing or under-billing.

You may use installment plans to pay what you owe your utility. They can be used for both current bills and overdue bills. A down payment and installment payments will be negotiated between you and your utility depending on your situation. If the agreed installment payments are not paid, the utility may disconnect your service.

If the disconnection will aggravate a medical or protective services emergency, the utility will delay service disconnection for up to 21 days. The utility may require documentation from a professional involved with the medical emergency or crisis.

## Winter Disconnection Rules

If the utility service provides or affects the primary heat source to your home, a utility **cannot** disconnect service from November 1 through April 15. Before winter, the utility must attempt to contact customers whose service was disconnected for non-payment. Utilities are also required to check the customer's well-being, attempt to negotiate payment plans, and inform the customer about any special assistance available to avoid disconnection.

## Meter Readings

If the utility cannot read your meter, you will get an estimated bill. Estimated usage is determined based on historical usage at the residence and weather patterns. To avoid estimated readings, you can read your own meter. The PSC requires utilities to read your meter at least once every six months and when there is a change of customer. You must allow these readings or your service can be disconnected.

The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin is an independent state agency that oversees more than 1,100 Wisconsin public utilities that provide natural gas, electricity, heat, steam, water and telecommunications services.



### Public Service Commission of Wisconsin

P.O. Box 7854

Madison, WI 53707-7854

Telephone: 608-266-5481

Toll free: 888-816-3831

Consumer affairs: 608-266-2001 / 800-225-7729

TTY: 608-267-1479 / 800-251-8345

Fax: 608-266-3957

Website: <http://psc.wi.gov>