



## **UTILITY RIGHTS: SHUT-OFFS and BILL DISPUTES**

(For Electric, Gas and Water Utilities Regulated by the Missouri Public Service Commission)

### **What procedures does the utility provider have to follow before shutting off my utilities?**

The utility provider must give you advance notice as follows:

- Written notice by either mail 10 days before the shut-off or personal delivery 96 hours before the shut-off.
- At least 24 hours before the shut-off, the utility provider must make reasonable efforts to contact the customer either in writing, by posting a “door hanger” notice or making 2 telephone calls.
- On the day of the shut-off, the utility provider must make reasonable efforts to contact the customer, provide identification, state the purpose of the visit, and post a notice that contains the address and telephone number to contact to have the service restored.

The utility provider cannot shut-off service due to your failure to pay the bill of another customer unless you received substantial benefit and use of the service. Service cannot be shut-off for failure of the previous owner or resident of the premises to pay a delinquent bill unless the previous owner or resident still lives on the premises. Service cannot be shut-off for service you received at a different address, but the bill can be combined with current bill. Service can be shut-off if payment is not made 21 days from the mailing of a combined bill and the above notice rules are followed.

### **What if I have a medical condition?**

A utility provider is required to postpone a shut off for up to 21 days if the shut-off would aggravate an existing medical emergency of the customer, any member of the family or other person that lives in the unit. If requested you must provide the utility provider reasonable evidence of the necessity (e.g., a note from a medical professional).

### **What is the “Hot Weather Rule”?**

Every year from June 1 to September 30, the Hot Weather Rule goes into effect and protects you from electricity shut-offs due to non-payment on days of extreme heat (any day the National Weather Service forecasts the temperature to be greater than 95 degrees or the heat index to be greater than 105 degrees). In addition, the utility cannot shut off service on days where it will not be available to reconnect service the day after the extreme heat.

### **What is the “Cold Weather Rule”?**

The Cold Weather rule goes into effect from November 1 through March 31 and prevents a utility provider from shutting off your heat for non-payment during times of extreme cold (any day when the National Weather Service forecasts the temperature will drop below 32 degrees). In addition, the utility cannot shut off service on days where it will not be available to reconnect services the day after the extreme cold. If you are elderly or disabled, you can register with the utility provider to gain access to additional payment options.

### **Are there any special rules for payment agreements during the Cold Weather Rule period?**

Service cannot be shut-off during the period if:

- You contact the utility provider and advise of your inability to pay in full;
- You make an “initial payment” (no more than 12% of a 12 month payment agreement or no more than 80% of the balance if the customer has defaulted on a Cold Weather Rule payment plan);
- You keep up with your payments under a “payment agreement” (payment agreement will run for at least 12 months or more covering past, current and future bills);

(over)

- If requested, you provide the utility provider with proof of your low income;
- None of the amount owed is due to unauthorized utility use; and
- For **low income** elderly or disabled customers who have registered with the utility provider, your monthly payment during the Cold Weather Rule period can be reduced temporarily to 50% of the current bill, if it is less than your payment agreement amount (but you will still have to pay the other 50% after the period ends).

Please note that if you default on a “payment agreement,” in some cases you can reinstate the payment agreement before service is shut off by paying the missed payment agreement amounts, as well as paying amounts not included in the payment agreement that have become past due.

**What kind of notice must a utility provider give before shutting off utilities during the Cold Weather Rule period?**

A utility provider must:

- Notify you of possible financial help to pay your bill;
- Send written notice by mail at least 10 days before the proposed shut-off;
- Attempt to contact the customer by either a second written notice by mail, a door hanger, or at least two phone calls 96 hours before shut-off;
- Attempt to contact the customer on the day of the shut-off; and
- For elderly or disabled customers who have registered with the utility provider, call and send a copy of the 10-day notice to the customer’s alternate contact and make personal contact with either the elderly or disabled customer or a family member aged 15 or more on the day of the shut-off.

**If my service is shut off, can a utility provider charge a deposit to reconnect during the Cold Weather Rule period?**

Utility providers **cannot** charge a deposit at reconnection during the Cold Weather Rule period if:

- You request reconnection and advise the utility provider that you can’t pay the bill in full;
- You make an “initial payment” (same as above except for gas customers - 50% of the balance or \$500, whichever is less - unless the customer has repeatedly defaulted);
- You keep up with your payments under a “payment agreement”;
- If requested, you provide the utility provider with proof of your low income; and
- None of the amount owed is due to unauthorized utility use.

**How can I find financial assistance to pay my utility bill?**

Call the United Way by dialing 211 or 1-800-427-4626 to locate agencies that may be able to assist you.

**My gas or electric bill has an error on it. How can I dispute my bill?**

If you don’t agree with a utility bill, you must dispute the charge with the utility provider either in writing, in person or by telephone. Service cannot be shut off for charges legitimately disputed 24 hours prior to shut-off, but frivolous disputes will not stop a service shut-off. You must pay the undisputed part of the bill. You must cooperate in resolving the dispute.

**Who can I call for help if I believe the utility provider is violating my rights?**

Call the Missouri Public Service Commission (1-800-392-4211) or the Missouri Attorney General (1-800-392-8222).