

# Your Rights as a Residential Water Customer

Know your payment and disconnection rights



## 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/complaintoverview.htm>. A staff member will obtain information from you and the utility company, and try to resolve the issue.

## Service Disconnection or Refusal

Utility services can be disconnected if you:

- Fail to pay your bills,
- Fail to comply with a deferred payment agreement,
- Tamper with your meter,
- Fail to pay a deposit,
- Have a safety hazard,
- Live at an address where a prior customer failed to pay their bills and continues to reside at that address, or
- Fail to provide utility access to your meter.

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. The maximum deposit for a new or existing residential account shall not exceed the highest gross bill for any consecutive billing period (not to exceed 4 months) selected by the utility. The following rules apply to payment and refund of deposits

- **Existing Residential Service:** A 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.
- **New Residential Service:** A deposit can be requested if you incurred an unpaid gas, electric, water, or sewer utility 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.

## Installment Plans and Medical Emergencies

If you are unable to pay your bill in full, you have a right to negotiate an installment payment plan with your utility. Installment plans may be used for both current bills and overdue bills. You will be asked to pay a reasonable down payment and make specific installment payments. The amount of your down payment and installment payments will be negotiated between you and your utility depending on your specific situation. If the agreed installment plan is not paid, the utility may disconnect your service. If you do not pay, the utility does not have to negotiate a new agreement before it shuts off your service.

If the disconnection will aggravate a medical or protective services emergency, the utility will delay service shut-off for up to 21 days. The utility may require documentation from your medical doctor, a public health or social service official, or a law enforcement official involved with the medical emergency or crisis.

## Delinquent Bills Levied as a Tax

Delinquent municipal utility bills may be transferred as a tax to the property tax bill of the property owner.

## Winter Disconnection Rules

If the water service impacts the primary heat source to your home (i.e., water or steam radiators), a utility cannot disconnect service from November 1<sup>st</sup> through April 15<sup>th</sup>. 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 or assist in reconnection.

## **Meter Readings**

If the utility cannot read your meter, you will get an estimated bill. To avoid estimated readings, you can read your own meter. The PSC requires utilities to make a reasonable effort to read your meter every four months if you are billed monthly or bimonthly, or every nine months if you are billed quarterly or less frequently, 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**

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