



Commercial Quality Regulation

Customer Care

Filing Complaints



- Consumers have the right to file complaints as to:
 - Existing rates
 - Proposed rates
 - Adequacy of service
 - Reliability of service
 - Accuracy of billing



Right to Service



- Consumers have the right to receive utility service provided that they comply with any requirements or eligibility criteria in the companies' tariffs and in PUC regulations
- With that right come various obligations
 - Possible security deposit
 - Access to premises, i.e. for meter reading
 - Timely payment of bills



Bills



Consumers have the right to:

- Receive clear and accurate bills based on actual meter readings by utility personnel
- Understand the various charges
- Dispute bills that appear to be incorrect

Consumers have responsibility to:

- Pay bill within 20 days of receipt



Customer-Utility Disputes



- Customer must first contact utility for purpose of resolving dispute before filing a complaint with the PUC
 - Applies to disputes involving credit determinations, deposit requirements, accuracy of utility metering or billing, and terminations
- Customer must pay bill pending outcome of dispute



Utility Response to Disputes



- When a customer initiates a dispute, the utility is obligated to:
 - Not issue a termination notice based on the disputed subject matter
 - Investigate the matter using reasonable methods such as telephone or personal conferences with ratepayer
 - Make a diligent attempt to negotiate a resolution of the dispute



Utility Response to Disputes (continued)



- Issue a report within 30 days to the customer and inform customer of right to go to PUC



Payment Agreements



- Payment agreements are available for some low-income customers who admit liability for billed service
 - Customer must meet certain income levels that are defined as a percent of the federal poverty level
 - Permitted to amortize or pay the unpaid balance of the account in one or more payments
 - Length of agreement varies depending on the customers' household income – i.e. no more than 5 years for customer at or below 150% of federal poverty level



Notice of Interruption



- Temporary interruptions of service by the utility are permitted for reasons relating to repairs, safety, protection of property and emergencies
- Prior notice must be given if the utility knows in advance
- Utility must also give notice of cause and expected duration



Termination With Prior Notice



- Utility may terminate service with prior notice for various reasons, including:
 - Nonpayment of undisputed delinquent account
 - Failure to complete payment of deposit
 - Failure to permit access to meters
 - Failure to comply with payment agreement



Timing of Termination



- Termination may occur any day from Monday through Friday so long as:
 - Utility can accept payment the following day
 - Utility can restore service within the number of days specified by law, ranging from 1-7 days
 - 1 day – erroneous termination, receipt of medical certification, winter months (November 30-April 1)
 - 3 days – April 1- November 30
 - 7 days – proper termination and reconnection requires street or sidewalk digging



Notice of Termination



- Utility must provide written notice of termination to customer at least 10 days prior to date of proposed termination
- Utility must attempt to contact the customer in person or by telephone at least 3 days prior to scheduled termination
- Utility must attempt to make personal contact with customers at time of termination



Winter Terminations



- From December through March, utility must either:
 - make personal contact with customer by visiting home, or
 - post a notice at the home within 48 hours of scheduled date of termination
- Utility must also attempt to make personal contact at time of termination
- No terminations permitted during winter months for customers at or below 250% of the federal poverty level



Post-Termination Notice



- When service has been terminated a notice must be posted or delivered to ratepayer which contains:
 - The address and phone number of utility to make arrangements to have service restored
 - A medical emergency notice form



Prior to Termination



- If contact is made by ratepayer prior to termination the utility shall fully explain:
 - Reasons for the proposed termination
 - Available methods for avoiding termination
 - Medical emergency procedures
 - Right of ratepayer to file a dispute with utility and an informal complaint with Commission
 - Duty of ratepayer to pay portion of bill not disputed



Terminations Without Prior Notice



- Utilities may terminate immediately without notice for any of the following actions:
 - Unauthorized use of service
 - Fraud or material representation of customer's identity for purpose of obtaining service
 - Tampering with meters
 - Committing actions that endanger safety of person or integrity of delivery system



Restoration of Service



- When service has been terminated, the utility shall reconnect service by the end of the first full working day after receiving one of the following:
 - Full payment of an outstanding balance
 - Amount due on a payment agreement
 - Unauthorized use or practice will cease
- Reasonable reconnection fee



Informal Complaints



- Within 10 days of notification or mailing of utility company report, customer may file an informal complaint with PUC's Bureau of Consumer Services, who then:
 - Notifies company and obtains report
 - Investigates complaint and seeks to resolve
 - Issues a decision that is binding on the parties unless appealed to the Office of Administrative Law Judge



Formal Complaints



- Formal complaints must be filed with the PUC's Secretary and be accompanied by a statement attesting to the truth
- Referred to the Office of Administrative Law Judge for mediation or hearing
- Decision is rendered
- Exceptions may be filed
- Commission Order



Residential Consumers Have Several Advocates



- Office of Consumer Advocate: Represents residential consumers in rates and service proceedings at the PUC
- Legal Services
- Public Utility Law Project
- Consumer Advisory Council: Advises the Commissioners on matters relating to the protection of consumer interests



Ratepayers Noncompliance



- When a ratepayer fails to comply with payment arrangements the original grounds for termination are revived
 - 10 day notice not required
 - Utility must contact ratepayer at least 3 days prior to termination
 - Service cannot be terminated during winter period



Energy Assistance Programs



- PUC has obligation to ensure availability of universal service for electric and natural gas customers
- PUC requires utilities to have programs and protections that help low-income customers to keep their utility service
- These programs may help consumers to pay utility bills or lower the amount of electricity or natural gas they use



Budget Billing



- Residential customers of electric and natural gas companies may pay a flat amount each month
- Avoids fluctuations in the bill during high usage months and allows customers to better plan for their energy expenses
- Can be adjusted four times per year depending on usage but these adjustments are usually not very significant



Chapter 56



- Chapter 56: the standards and billing practices for residential energy, water and wastewater utility service
- Found in Title 52 of the Pennsylvania Code
- <http://www.pacode.com/secure/data/052/chapter56/subchapterEtoc.html>

