

*Mission Statement:*

*The UTC protects consumers by ensuring that utility and transportation services are fairly priced, available, reliable, and safe.*



# Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission

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## Consumer Issues

Prepared for: The Kyrgyz Republic SEA

Suzanne Stillwell, Consumer Affairs Supervisor  
August, 2003

# Overview of the WUTC's Customer Service Procedures and Dispute Resolution Functions

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- Consumer Affairs – provides a range of consumer protection services to customers of regulated utility and transportation companies.
- Public Involvement - principal responsibility for developing consumer education materials, assisting members of the media, helping consumers understand regulatory issues before the Commission, and participating in Commission proceedings.
- Business Practices – conducts investigations of alleged violations of state law, agency rules or orders, and company tariffs or price lists for both utility and transportation companies to ensure compliance.

# Consumer Affairs



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The Consumer Affairs staff serves the public interest by helping assure that consumers and regulated companies are treated appropriately, fairly and consistently.

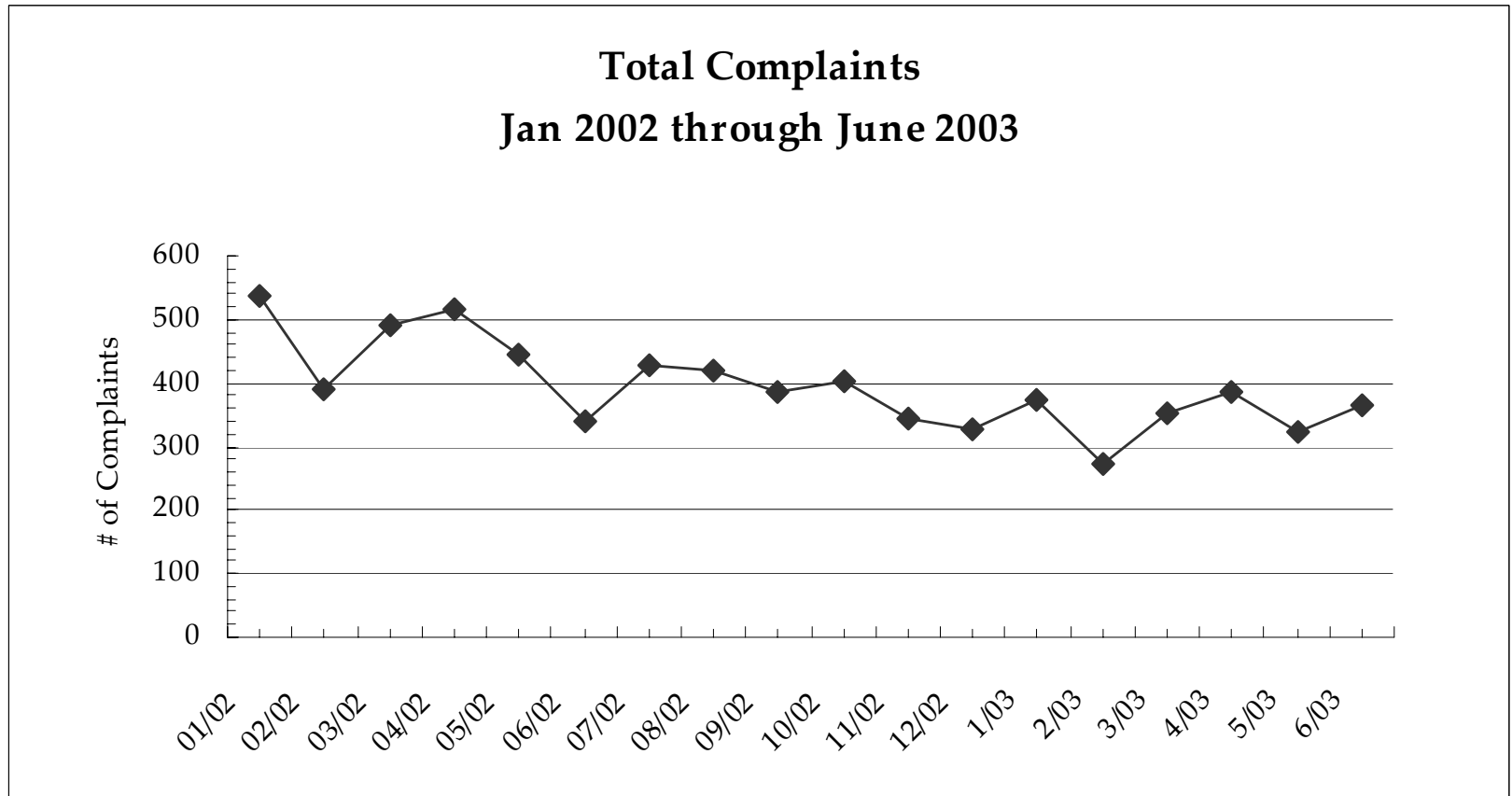
- Provide advice and information to regulated companies to assist them in developing policies, improving customer service, and reducing complaints.
- Provide advice and recommendations to the Commission on policies and other issues that affect service to the consumer.
- Assist consumers and regulated companies with their inquiries and complaints.
- Provide consumers with the information they need to make informed choices about their utility and transportation services.
- Help consumers understand their rights and responsibilities, Commission decisions, and industry changes.
- Ensure compliance with laws, rules, policies, and tariffs.

# Energy Consumer Rules

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- Residential deposit requirements
  - Refusal of service
  - Disconnection of service
  - Reconnecting service after disconnection
  - Payment arrangements
  - Complaint meter tests

# Dispute Resolution

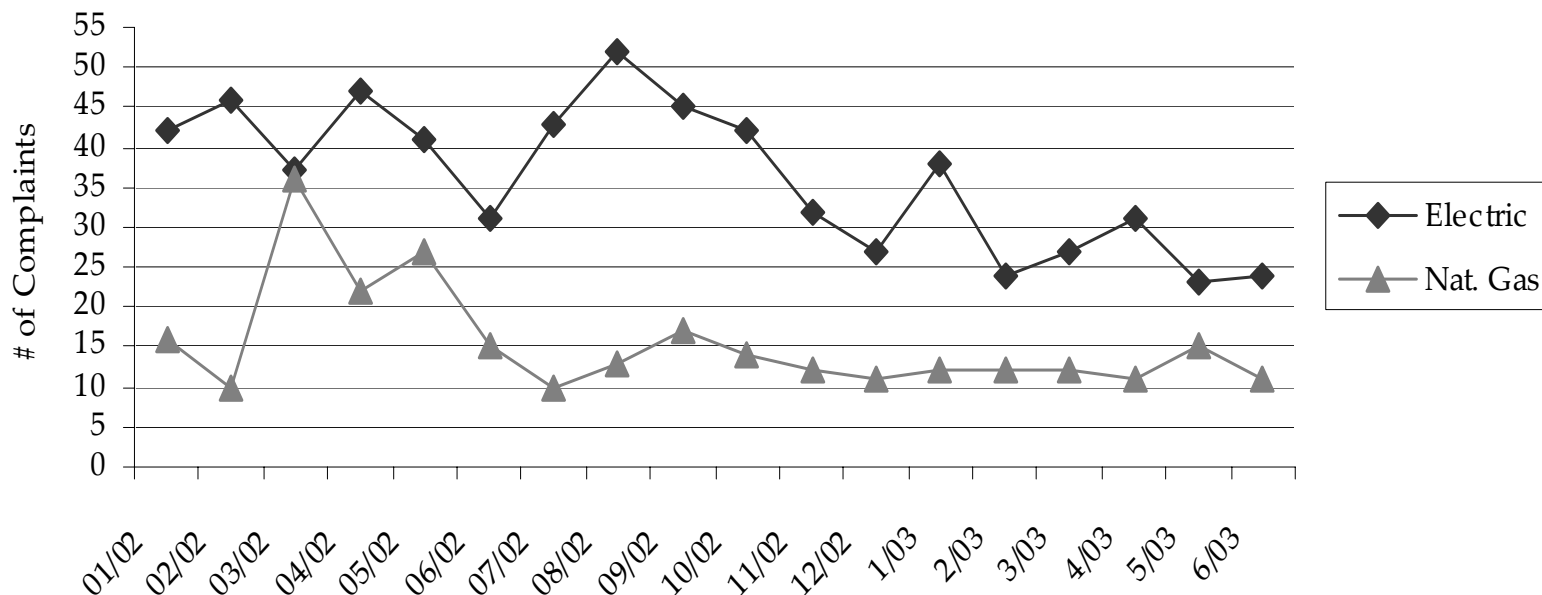
## All industries complaint statistics



# Dispute Resolution

## Energy complaint statistics

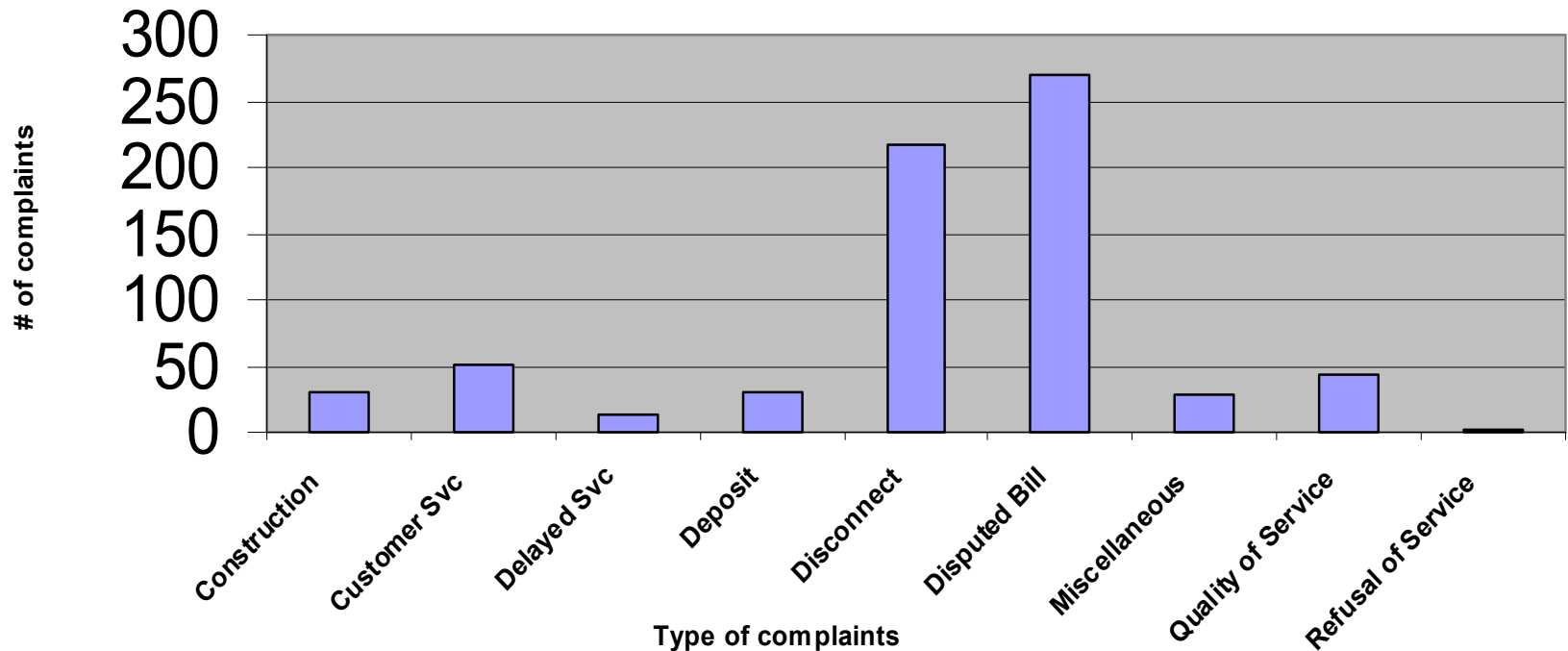
**Electric & Natural Gas Industry Complaints**  
**Jan 2002 through June 2003**



# Dispute Resolution

## Typical energy complaints

Energy Company Complaints 2002



# Dispute Resolution

How do we resolve energy complaints?

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- High bill complaints
- Retroactive bill complaints
- Disconnection and threat of disconnection



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## Energy Assistance

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# Programs can help keep the heat on!



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All Washington state energy companies have programs that allow customers to pay for winter heating throughout the year, help customers receive funding to defray high heating power bills, and provide emergency assistance to keep heat on when there are no other options available.

# Payment Arrangements

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Payment arrangements can be made directly with the company when a customer is late in paying their energy bill. Because the company can disconnect service for unfulfilled payment arrangements, customers must take care in setting monthly payments to ensure that the obligation can be met over the course of the arrangements.

# Budget Payment Plans (BPP)



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The Budget Payment Plan allows customers to spread out their payments over the year. It makes budgeting for power bills easier because the customer knows the exact amount due each month. The company determines the amount of the customer's monthly bill by averaging the cost of the energy used the previous year.

Budget payment amounts are reviewed every four months and adjusted according to how much gas or electricity each customer is using. The payment plan is automatically adjusted at the end of the twelve-month budget period so that customers pay only for the energy used. The Budget Payment Plan is available throughout the year.

# Energy Assistance Programs

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There are a number of organizations that have programs available to help low-income customers pay their expensive heating bills during the cold winter months. Customers must meet certain income or age eligibility criteria to receive assistance.

# Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)



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- LIHEAP is a federal government funded program that provides funds to conduct outreach activities, assistance to low income households to meet their home energy costs during the winter, and provides low-cost weatherization and other cost-effective energy-related home repair.
  - Monthly household income cannot exceed 125% of the federal poverty guidelines.
  - The benefit ranges from \$25 to \$750. The average statewide benefit in 2002 was \$376.
  - A statewide network of 27 local community-based nonprofit organizations and units of local government provide these energy and weatherization services.

# Salvation Army Energy Fund



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- The Salvation Army is a non-profit charitable organization that, in part, administers contributions to people with limited incomes. Its staff and volunteers screen applicants to determine eligibility and ensure that the support reaches those most in need. The fund is supported by private donations and helps to cover some of the cost of high heating bills.
  - Assistance is typically available from January through June, or until the funds are gone.
  - Salvation Army assistance centers are located in counties throughout the state.

# Winter Moratorium



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**The Moratorium** is an emergency measure that enables low-income individuals who have exhausted all other alternatives to keep their heat on during the winter months (November 15 through March 15). If the payment arrangements under this program are not kept, the company can disconnect a customer's electricity and refuse to reconnect until the entire balance owed is paid. To qualify for the Moratorium a customer must:

- Provide the utility company with a statement proving that the household's monthly average income is within eligibility limits (125% of the federal poverty guidelines).
- Make and keep payment arrangements.



# Company Assistance Programs



- Ratepayer-funded energy bill assistance
- Community-funded energy bill assistance
- Energy efficiency programs, such as weatherization and heating system improvements, low interest loans on high-efficiency appliances, and rebates towards efficient furnaces, water heaters, light bulbs, and low-flow shower heads.
- Conservation education – energy analysis tools; online, in-person, and mailed surveys.
- Customer Assistance Referral & Evaluation service (CARES)

# What more can we do to assist consumers with high utility bills?



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Work with electric and natural gas utilities to add measures that don't exist today to alleviate hardships for low income households, such as:

- Require extended payment periods.
- Encourage payment options by credit and debit card, or from checking accounts, without charge.
- Regularly provide consumer information and education on home energy efficiency and conservation.
- Provide and promote home energy audits and weatherization programs without charge to low income households.