

*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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## NARUC Workshop on General Regulatory Issues

### Consumer Protection 1 – Overview of the WUTC's Customer Service Rules, Service Reliability, and Energy Assistance

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# Overview of the WUTC's Consumer and Reliability Rules

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- Utilities obligation to serve  
(WAC 480-100-123)
- Notice and information to consumers  
(WAC 480-100-103)
- Connection and disconnection  
(WAC 480-100-108 and 480-100-128)
- Winter moratorium  
(WAC 480-100-143)
- Privacy  
(WAC 480-100-153)
- Electric Service Reliability  
(WAC 480-100-388, 393, 398)

# Obligation to Serve

WAC 480-100-123



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A utility must serve all customers except when:

- The customer's wiring or equipment makes providing service unsafe.
- The company or customer cannot secure the necessary rights of way.
- The customer has tampered with or stolen the utility's property.
- The customer has used service through an illegal connection.
- The customer has fraudulently used service.
- The customer is not willing to pay for a line extension.
- The customer is not willing to pay the required deposit.

# Notice and Information to Customers

## WAC 480-100-103

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1. A utility must provide:
  - A toll-free telephone number for customers to contact the company.
  - All information necessary to obtain service at its public offices.
2. A utility must provide to a new customer a rights and responsibilities guide that includes:
  - The utility's regular business hours.
  - The utility's mailing address, toll-free and 24-hour emergency number.
  - An explanation of the utility's processes regarding deposits, billing, delinquent accounts, disconnection, disputes, and the commission's informal complaint procedures.
3. On request, a utility must provide:
  - A detailed account of actual usage for the previous 12 months.
  - A comparison of the current month's usage with the same month in the prior year.

# Connection and Disconnection

WAC 480-100-108 and 480-100-128



Prior to connecting service, a utility may require:

- The customer's name, address, and telephone number.
- Proof of identification.

The utility must provide the due date, if facilities exist.

A utility may disconnect service with notice if:

- The customer fails to pay his/her bill.
- The customer refuses to allow the company access to the premises.

# Connection and Disconnection

## - Customer Notice to Disconnect

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Before disconnecting service, the utility must:

- Provide the customer, by mail or in person, a written disconnection notice, to include:
  - Disconnection date
  - Cause for disconnection
  - Delinquent balance
  - Charges that may be assessed for disconnection or reconnection
  - The utility's name, address, and toll-free number
- Allow the customer at least 8 business days before disconnecting service.
- Provide the customer an additional notice prior to disconnection, by mail, in person, or by telephone contact.
- Disconnect within 10 days of the disconnection date.

# Connection and Disconnection

## - Disconnect Without Notice

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A utility may disconnect service without notice when:

- The customer has tampered with or stolen the utility's property.
- The customer has used service through an illegal connection.
- The customer has fraudulently used service.
- The customer has vacated the premises.
- The customer's wiring or equipment makes providing service unsafe.
- The customer fails to keep an agreed-upon payment arrangement.

# Connection and Disconnection

## - Medical Emergencies

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If the customer claims a medical emergency, the utility must:

- Delay disconnect or reinstate service for 5 days.
- Require the customer, within 5 days, to provide a written statement from a qualified medical practitioner that documents the medical emergency.
- Allow the customer, within 5 days, to pay 10% of the delinquent balance and agree to pay the remaining balance within 120 days.



# Winter Low-Income payment Program

## WAC 480-100-143

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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.

# Privacy

WAC 480-100-153



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A company may not disclose a customer's name, address, telephone number, or information about the customer's use of service without the customer's written permission.

# Electric Service Reliability Rules

WAC 480-100-388/393/398



- Primary aim is to ensure that the Commission has reliable information from the utilities in order to track trends.
- Rule requires an annual report to include:
  - Baseline statistics
  - Annual statistics for 7 years
  - Discussion of changes in data collection
  - Geographic areas of greatest reliability concern
  - Number of customer complaints about reliability and power quality

# Common Reliability Statistics



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- System Average Interruption Frequency Index (SAIFI)  
Average number of sustained interruptions per customer
  - System Average Interruption Duration Index (SAIDI)  
Average sustained outage time per customer
  - Momentary Average Interruption Frequency Index (MAIFI)  
Average number of momentary interruption per customer
  - Customer Average Interruption Duration Index (CAIDI)  
Average restoration time

# Service Quality Measures

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- Established in merger proceedings to ensure customers will not experience a deterioration in quality of service as a result of company mergers.
- Comprised of customer guarantees and performance measurements.
- Compensation paid to customers for failing to meet customer guarantees.
- Financial penalties applied for failing to meet benchmark performance measurements.

# Customer Guarantees

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- Restore service as soon as possible.
- Appointments will be kept. Companies pay customers \$50, if fail to meet commitment.
- Activate power supply promptly.
- Provide estimate for new supply within 2 days.
- Respond to bill inquiry within 15 days.
- Give customer at least 2 days notice for planned interruptions.

# Performance Measurements

## Example - PSE



Index	Benchmark
1) Overall Customer Satisfaction	90% Satisfied
2) WUTC Complaint Ratio	0.50 Complaints per 1000 customers
3) SAIDI	136 Minutes/customer
4) SAIFI	1.30 Interruptions/customer
5) Call center answer performance	75% of calls answered by representative w/in 30 seconds

# Performance Measurements

## Example – PSE (continued)



Index	Benchmark
6) Customer satisfaction with call center transaction	90% Satisfied
7) Gas Safety Response Time	Average of 55 minutes for arrival of field technician
8) Customer satisfaction with field service transactions	90% Satisfied
9) Disconnection Ratio	0.030 Disconnections/customer
10) Missed appointments	8% Appointments missed
11) Electric Safety Response Time	Average of 55 minutes for arrival of field technician



# Service Contracts

WAC 480-80-141(1)

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A utility may use service contracts when its tariffs require certain assurances from the customer for specific service level such as a commitment to a minimum period of service.

Utilities must provide standard service contracts in tariffs.

- Net metering
- Underground conversion of facilities
- Line extensions

# Net metering agreement

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- For customer-generators of fuel cells, hydro, solar, or wind power generators < 25 kW.
- Contract establishes conditions about:
  - Delivery of excess energy produced by generator.
  - Interconnection, operation, and maintenance of generators according to utility's safety and reliability standards.
  - Inspections of generators by utility.
  - No liability by the utility.

# Energy Assistance – Programs Keep the Heat On.



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

- 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.

# 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.

# 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.