



Consumer Guide Utility Services

WASHINGTON
UTC
UTILITIES AND TRANSPORTATION
COMMISSION

Utility Services

The Utilities and Transportation Commission (commission) regulates the rates and services of privately or investor-owned electric, gas, telephone and water companies. Our mission is to protect consumers by ensuring that these services are fairly priced, available, reliable and safe.

This guide contains answers to frequently asked questions from customers of companies regulated by the commission. If you have additional questions, call our toll free Consumer Help Line at 1-888-333-WUTC (9882).

Starting Services

When must I pay a deposit for service?

Generally, homeowners and customers with good credit records will not have to pay a deposit. If you do not have a satisfactory credit rating, you may be required to pay a deposit before service can begin. Conditions that might require a deposit include:

- An overdue balance owed to a similar company from whom you have received two or more delinquent notices;

- You were refused service or disconnected for failing to pay a similar bill during the last 12 months; or
- Another occupant at your address has an overdue bill owed to the company.

How much will my deposit be?

A typical deposit will be about two times the monthly bill.

When is my deposit due?

Usually half of the deposit is due when service is connected, with the balance due in two monthly installments.

What if I cannot pay a deposit?

Ask your utility for options. For example, a friend or family member with good credit may be willing to assume financial responsibility for your utility bill. Or you can receive limited service (such as no long-distance) during the time that your credit is being established. Energy utilities may allow you to pre-pay an estimate of your monthly bills in lieu of a deposit.

When will I get my deposit back?

After paying your bill on time for 12 consecutive months your deposit will either be applied to your next bill or returned to you. In either case, you will get your deposit amount plus interest. On-time payment means you

did not receive more than two past-due notices within the last 12 months and have not been disconnected for non-payment.

When does a bill become past due?

Bills become past-due 15 days from the date issued.

Can I change my bill's due date?

If you can show good cause, the company must change your due date to coincide with your payday.

What information must be on my bill?

The bill must include the company's name, address and phone number to call for information or to dispute bills. In addition, the bill must include:

- Dollar amount or percentage of the bill that is taxes or fees;
- Each assessed charge listed as a separate line item;
- Last meter reading for water and energy;
- Due date; and
- Date bill becomes overdue.



How do I dispute a bill?

Contact the company and try to resolve the complaint with them, ask to speak to a supervisor. If you cannot resolve your dispute with the company, call the commission's Consumer Protection Help Line at 1-888-333-WUTC (9882) to open an informal complaint, commission staff will work with the company on your behalf.

How can I learn more about the rates my company charges?

Many companies will send you a copy of their rates upon request. If not, a copy must be available for public inspection at the company's office. You may also review the company's tariff, a document outlining rates, terms and conditions for providing service, at commission offices in Olympia or request that a copy be mailed to you. Unless the tariff is unusually large, there is no charge for this mailing.



Losing Service

Can my service be disconnected without my permission?

Yes, if you do not pay your bill on time, if you fail to make a deposit payment or if you began service under false or illegal pretenses such as using another person's name.

When can service be disconnected?

Utility companies may not disconnect your service on weekends, legal holidays or any other day when the company cannot re-establish service the same or following day. Exceptions can be made if the disconnection is necessary to prevent danger to life or property.

Can a company disconnect my service while I am disputing the bill?

As long as you pay undisputed portions of your bill, a company may not disconnect your service if the commission is investigating your claim.

Must a company notify me before it disconnects my service?

Yes. Before disconnection, a customer must receive at least one written notice accurately stating the amounts

owed and detailing the process that needs to be followed to avoid disconnection. A company seeking disconnection must also attempt additional contacts with the customer either by telephone or by another written notice. Written notices can either be mailed or hand-delivered.

Are there exceptions to the notification requirement?

Yes. If you tamper with the gas or electricity meter, the company may disconnect service without notice.

May a company charge to reconnect my service?

Yes. Utility companies can charge reconnection fees based on what is allowed in their tariff.

Providing Service

May a company refuse to provide me service for having an unpaid utility bill?

Phone companies may refuse service but must offer you at least one chance to pay the amount owed over time. *Failure to pay for long-distance calls and other charges unrelated to basic local phone service is not grounds for disconnecting local service.* Energy and water companies, however, may not refuse service to disconnected customers. Instead, these companies can require a deposit and reconnect fee.

If I don't owe a company anything, can I still be denied service?

A company can deny service if you live outside their service territory. This usually applies to people living in remote rural locations. If you need to have new lines installed, the telephone company requires that the customer has secured right-of-way access and that installation of lines doesn't pose any hazard to the installer.

Rates

How is my utility rate determined?

Many factors contribute to the cost of energy, water and telecommunications services, including equipment, repair and administrative costs, employee wages, taxes and compliance with local regulations. When any of these costs increase or decrease, a company may seek approval from the commission for a rate adjustment.

How will I know if my company is proposing a rate change?

Your company is required to inform all customers of proposed rate changes before they go into effect. Customers may comment in writing about any proposed rate case or in person at public meetings.

How can I get more information about a pending rate case?

Call the commission’s Consumer Help Line for more information on pending rate cases. You may also request that your name be placed on an “interested persons” mailing list so that you are notified of any hearings regarding changes to your company’s rates.

How does the UTC decide whether to approve a rate change?

UTC staff examines all rate proposals to see if the request is fair, just, reasonable and sufficient. This review includes an audit of the company’s expenses and verification of the quality of service provided, comments



from the public are also considered. After this review, staff makes a recommendation to the three-member

commission at a public hearing at which customers are allowed to speak on the proposal. The UTC may choose to approve changes proposed by a company, grant lower rates, or postpone the rate increase for further investigation.

Contact the Commission

Consumer Help Line

1-888-333-WUTC (9882) toll free
consumer@utc.wa.gov

General Information

(360) 664-1160
info@utc.wa.gov

www.utc.wa.gov

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To request this document in alternative formats to accommodate persons with disabilities please call (360) 664-1133 or TTY 1-800-416-5989.



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