

# DAHLBERG LIGHT & POWER COMPANY

## Your Bill of Rights as a Residential Gas and Electric Utility Customer

This brochure was prepared by the Public Service Commissions of Wisconsin and has been printed and distributed by your local utility.

This Brochure is a summary. Write to the Commission for copies of complete rules, or additional brochures.

If you have any problems with your utility bills, contact your utility. If you are not satisfied, write:

Wisconsin Public Service Commission  
Po Box 7854  
Madison, WI 53707

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### Common Concerns

The relationship between you and your utility involves rights and responsibilities for both parties. The Wisconsin Public Service Commission (PSC) recognizes the vital importance of gas and electric service to consumers as well as their need and desire for more information. This pamphlet talks about the most common concerns and questions raised by consumers in their dealings with utilities.

### Deposits

Most Customers do not have to post deposits to receive utility service. But, if you apply for residential service as a new customer, and you owe an undisputed bill from sometime within the last six years, you may be required to pay a deposit.

However, you may enter into a deferred payment agreement instead of paying a deposit.

Furthermore, if your service has been disconnected within the past 12 months, or if the utility discovers that you have falsified credit information on your original application for service, you may be required to pay a deposit.

The amount of the deposit is based on the total of the two highest consecutive months' bills during the previous 12-month period. This is the maximum amount that can be requested. In lieu of the deposit, the utility may accept a guarantor agreement.

A guarantor agreement is a contract, signed by a second person acceptable to the company, guaranteeing payment of your bills up to the amount of the cash deposit. The contract may last up to two years, but no longer, and may be terminated by the guarantor's giving the utility 30 days' written notice.

The deposit earns interest at a rate annually set by the P. S. C. Interest is earned from the date of deposit to the date of refund or the date you stop service, whichever is earlier.

Deposits are reviewed every 12 months. The utility shall refund the deposit of a residential customer after 12 consecutive months of prompt payment.

### Budget Billing

Budget billing plans are available from all gas and electric utilities. Enrollment is open to all residential customers at any time of the year, even if you are in arrears. However, you must make separate payment arrangements to take care of the arrears.

The budget amount is calculated by examining the past gas and/or electric consumption for the address and any projected rate increases. These charges are averaged over an 11- or 12-month period. The budget figure is recalculated every six months to ensure accuracy. Then, if necessary, the amount is adjusted to reflect your actual use.

At the end of the budget year the amount under or over billed should be no more than one month's budget amount. If at the end of the budget year you owe money to the company, you can pay this off in a lump sum or make other payment arrangements. If you have money coming back, you can have this applied as a credit

against the account or request a refund. The utility may remove you account from the budget plan if you miss two consecutive month's payments.

### Late Payment Charges

If your utility is authorized to use late payment charges, you have 20 days from the date the bill is issued to make a payment and avoid the charges. Depending on the utility, one of two plans is authorized by the PSC:

1. A "monthly Charge" of no more than 1 percent per month compounded this charge is applied to the total unpaid balance, including unpaid late payment charges.
2. A one-time 3 percent late charge applied only to any unpaid balance for the current month's usage.

Late Payment charges are applied to all customer classes (including budget payment plans), and, if properly applied, may not be waived.

Your bill contains information as to the amount of the charge and the date after which it will be applied. If you dispute a bill, the late payment charge is applied if the dispute is ultimately resolved in the utility's favor and payment has not been made by the original due date.

### Billing

Bills may appear complicated, but they now provide more information than ever before. If you cannot understand your bill, call the utility for an explanation.

All bills are required to provide present and previous meter readings, the date of the present reading, and the number of units of gas or electricity used.

For example, electric bills show:

- \* This meter reading
- \* Last Meter reading
- \* Electricity used, measured in kilowatt hours (kWh)

And gas bills show:

- \* this meter reading
- \* last meter reading
- \* gas used, measured in therms.

Estimated and minimum bill must be marked that they are estimated. Many utilities also include information so you can check what kind of results you are getting from any conservation measures you have taken. If this is not on your bill, you can ask your utility for the information.

Bills are based on the readings obtained by the utility's meter readings. However, you may read your own meter and send in a special card if the reader is unable to gain access to the meter, or if you request such cards. If the card is not received on time or not returned, you will be issued an estimated bill.

It is your benefit to allow the meter reader access to the meter or to return the card on time. If you fail to provide access to your meter for six months or longer, the utility may take steps to disconnect your service.

In emergencies, such as severe storms, the utility may issue estimated bills without reading the meter or supplying cards.

Bills are issued on a monthly basis except in unusual circumstances. You have 20 days from the date the bill is issued to make payment. Making your payment during this period will avoid the application of any late payment charges or the issuing of a disconnection notice.

### Deferred Payment Agreements

If you are unable to pay the full amount of a bill when it comes due, you have the right to enter a deferred payment agreement with the utility. Utilities design deferred payment agreements to help you pay your current bills and to take care of any arrears though the payment of monthly installments. They are available to all residential customers.

If you make a reasonable down payment and agree to pay the arrears in reasonable installments in addition to the current bill or budget payment, your service may not be turned off.

"Reasonable" is determined by taking into account, the amount of time it has been due, your ability to pay, your payment history, the reasons why debt has been outstanding, and any other significant factors concerning your individual circumstances.

The utility may require you to sign a deferred payment agreement form. You should not sign the form if the agreement is not satisfactory to you. You do have the right to make a counter offer.

If your counter offer is rejected, the utility must give you an explanation of why it was rejected.

If you and the utility are still unable to reach an agreement, you can appeal to the Public Service Commission, PO Box 7854, Madison, Wisconsin 53707, (800) 225-7729, for a review.

During an appeal period your service may not be disconnected for the disputed amount. You are, however, required to pay all other bills that are not in dispute.

If you sign the agreement, you give up your right to dispute the amount due under the agreement unless the utility fails or refuses to follow the terms of the agreement.

If you fail to keep the agreed terms, your service may be disconnected. The utility is not required to negotiate the agreement prior to disconnection.

### **Disconnection Notice**

Prior to disconnection your service, the utility must provide you with a written notice of its intent to discontinue service. The notice must contain information stating when your service will be turned off and for what reasons. The notice should contain a phone number so you can contact the utility to discuss your situation and to make payment arrangements, if necessary.

However, your service may be continued for 21 days if you can provide a written statement from a doctor, nurse, public health official or social service agency saying that a medical emergency exists in your residence.

To help you avoid the disconnection of your service, the utility's disconnect notice should also notify you of your right to contact the Public Service Commission if you and the utility are unable to reach an agreement.

A copy of the disconnection notice is sent to your home or mailing address, and the service address, if it is different. It must be mailed at least eight days prior to your disconnection date. If your service is not turned off within 15 days after the notice was mailed, a new notice must be left on the premises sometime between 24 and 48 hours before the utility intends to disconnect service.

Prior to disconnection of service, the utility must make a sincere effort to speak with you, either in person or by telephone. If you have previously submitted a written request, the utility will notify the county social services department, or some other agency or person of your choice, before disconnection your service.

The disconnection may not occur on a day, or on the day before utility offices are closed – unless the utility has personnel available all the time to handle payment arrangements with customers.

If your service is disconnected and then remains turned off for 24 hours or more, the utility is required to contact the local law enforcement agency and inform it of the fact your service was disconnected.

### **Disconnection Restriction**

Your service may not be disconnected for failure to pay for merchandise for a non-utility service, such as appliances repairs. The utility may not disconnect for failure to make payments on different classes of service.

For example, if you have both residential and business accounts, the utility may not disconnect your home service for failure to pay an account from your business address. You may also not be held liable for payment of another person's bill, unless that person is a member of your household.

As mentioned earlier, your service may not be disconnected for 21 days if you get a note from a licensed Wisconsin physician or public health or social service official identifying a medical emergency in your household.

The purpose of the extension is to allow you the time to make payment arrangements. The utility will grant another extension if you renew the emergency note.

Further extensions will not be granted unless you can show the existence of extraordinary circumstances and that you have been

making a good faith effort to work out a solution to the situation by working closely with the utility.

If the Public Service Commission declares a winter emergency, your service may not be disconnected unless there are reasonable grounds to believe that the disconnection will not endanger human health or life. Disconnections are not entirely prohibited during a winter emergency.

### **New Cold Weather Disconnection Rules**

In November 1984, the Wisconsin Public Service Commission adopted new administrative rules to govern electric and natural gas customer disconnections and service restoral in the winter – even if no winter emergency is declared.

The new rules go into effect November 1 for the northern half of Wisconsin and November 15 for the southern half. The rules end April 15 statewide. They are in addition to year-round disconnection requirements, not in lieu of them.

The new provisions require utilities to contact customers who were disconnected prior to winter rule period in order to make special efforts to get them reconnected. By the time the cold weather period begins the utilities must inform social service agencies and local law enforcement about customers remaining disconnected.

They also require:

- that a management-level utility employee give written approval before a disconnection may be made.
- That the utility make a follow-up visit to a disconnected customer the day following disconnection to check on the customers well-being and to inform the customer of payment options and assistance which may be available.
- That the utility file periodic reports with the commission regarding the number of disconnected residents.

### **Disputed Procedures**

If you have any questions regarding a bill or other utility matter, or have received notice of pending disconnection of service, the first step is to contact the utility to seek an explanation or to work out an arrangement.

The utility should investigate your complaint promptly, report the results of its investigation to you, try to settle the dispute, and give you a chance to make a deferred payment arrangement if you are behind on your bill.

If you are not satisfied with the utility's explanation, or are unable to come to an agreement regarding your account, you may contact the Public Service Commission for a review of your dispute. While the dispute procedure is being pursued with either the utility or the PSC, your service may not be turned off. You are, however required to pay on time all charges that are not in dispute.

The PSC staff will review your complaint, contact the utility and attempt to reach a solution that both parties will accept. If an agreement cannot be reached, at least five days must elapse between the PSC staff's determination and any further disconnection action by the utility.

If you are not satisfied with the PSC staff's determination, you have the right to ask for a "formal review." This request must be submitted in writing within five days after the staff issues its determination.

If you request a formal review, the commissioners will examine your dispute and inform you by letter of their decision. Your service may not be turned off while the matter is pending. However, you are required to continue paying all bills which are not in dispute.

### **Bilingual Service**

Many Utilities have customer representatives who speak Spanish. If you wish, call the utility's local customer relations office and ask to consult with a Spanish-speaking representative.

### **Servicio Bilingue**

Muchas Empresas de Servicios publicos tienen representantes qui hablan espanol. Si usted necesita este servicio, llame a la oficina local de ayuda para los clientes y pregunte por on representante que hable espanol.