
Introduction and How to Use This Book

This book was born out of our experience in providing advice to individual consumers about their utility service. We saw a need for a simple, how-to guide for both utility customers and the front-line social services workers and advocates who assist them.

At the National Consumer Law Center (NCLC), we have been helping utility consumers for thirty years on a broad range of utility and energy problems. We advise individuals on their problems, such as making payment plans and avoiding utility service termination. We also work on larger-scale issues, like opposing utility rate hikes, advocating for the adoption of low-income discount rates, and designing programs that make it easier for low-income families to afford their utility bills. For many years, we have published *Access to Utility Service*, a legal treatise that contains hundreds of pages of in-depth analysis and detail that lawyers and experienced advocates need to represent their clients.

Over the years, we have also seen the need for a short, simple, and practical guide designed primarily for customers as well as advocates who do *not* specialize in utility issues. We hope that this guide will provide a handy, straightforward reference source for consumers and non-experts. This introduction provides an overview of what is contained in the following chapters and how best to use the materials.

WHO SHOULD USE THIS BOOK?

This book is about how to avoid utility terminations, locate financial assistance to help pay utility bills, and how to otherwise confront utility problems. It is designed for consumers and those in front-line positions who help individuals with any number of consumer, financial, or family problems. Such front-line workers include: social workers at government and private agencies and hospitals; advocates for the elderly; legal services staff; those who work for housing agencies; and fuel assistance and weatherization

THE RIGHTS OF UTILITY CONSUMERS

agency employees. We hope that even experienced utility advocates will find something of value in this volume as well.

WHAT TYPES OF UTILITY SERVICES DOES THIS BOOK COVER?

This book focuses on gas and electric service—the services that many people use to heat, cool, and light their homes and run various appliances. Although water and telephone service are covered, there is less extensive discussion of them. Every state in the country regulates, in one form or another, gas and electric companies, and those state regulations contain important consumer protections. By becoming more familiar with state regulations and protections, consumers and their advocates will be able to solve many (but by no means all) of the utility problems they encounter.

Chapter 1 is an overview of the nature of gas and electric utility regulation. Chapter 2 is about obtaining service, including deposit requirements, the use of “credit scoring” to determine deposit amounts, and requirements that bills be cleared up from prior addresses. Chapter 3 explains how to reduce utility bills by applying for fuel assistance, discount rates (where available), weatherization assistance, and assistance from other programs. Chapter 4 examines the often very powerful protections against termination of utility service that exist in most states. Chapter 5 discusses late fees and service restoration fees. Chapter 6 explains how consumers and their advocates can assert rights before state public utility commissions.

Chapter 7 addresses telephone and water service. In general, there are fewer rules governing telephone service than for gas and electric service. As for water service, a large percentage of consumers are served by municipal or other local governmental water agencies, which, as a general rule, are not regulated by state public utility commissions. Therefore, the discussion of the rights of water customers in this guide is limited.

Finally, Chapter 8 briefly discusses “deliverable” fuels and their protections: home heating oil, propane, wood, and coal. Few regulations anywhere in the country cover these fuels and there are therefore few protections.

We caution those who use this book that rules governing utility service vary quite widely by state. It is therefore impossible to provide detailed advice that applies in every state. When using this book, you should make sure to check the local rules in your state; this book provides advice on how to do

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that. The appendices at the end of this guide provide a great deal of useful information. Appendix C.3 contains a list of each of the state utility regulatory commissions, including contact information. Most states' utility commission web pages provide links to the regulations governing billing and terminations, or at least a summary with cross-references where you can find the complete regulations. In addition, Appendix E.1 contains citations to each state's utility regulations, as well as links to the websites where they can be found. While we cannot adequately describe the regulations in each of the 50 states in this one book, the chapters and appendices should provide a roadmap that will help consumers and advocates in every state develop strategies to address utility problems.

Anyone interested in a more detailed discussion of the topics covered in this guide should use National Consumer Law Center, *Access To Utility Service* (3d ed. 2004 and Supp.), which may be ordered on-line at www.consumerlaw.org. That website also contains information about NCLC's utility and energy initiatives, by clicking on "action agenda."

We welcome any comments you may have about this book, sent to publications@nclc.org or by phone at 617-542-8010.