

# State offers advice on avoiding winter utility disconnections

 Augusta — The Maine Public Utilities Commission wants Maine consumers to know that the lights will stay on for those who make an honest effort to pay their electricity and gas bills. Maine’s winter electricity and gas disconnection rules begin Nov. 15. During the six-month “winter” period, Mainers who contact their electric or gas utility, or the Commission, to make reasonable monthly payments will not be disconnected.

Commission Chair Jack Cashman said, “We know that Mainers work hard to pay their winter bills. Our rules make sure that anyone who is facing disconnection gets a fair chance to arrange for reasonable payments and keep their service connected.”

Commission rules prohibit gas and electric utilities from shutting off service to any customer whom they are able to contact between Nov. 15 and April 15 without explicit permission from the Commission’s Consumer Assistance Division. The CAD will work with customers to establish affordable payment arrangements, and to find financial assistance for paying electric or gas bills.

Under Commission winter disconnection rules, all Maine customers should receive from their gas or electricity provider information explaining their rights. Electric and gas utilities must also deliver an information packet to any customer whose service was disconnected for nonpayment during the summer months and was never reconnected.

Letters, phone calls and in-person attempts at contact are all required before a disconnection may take place. If a utility decides to seek permission for a winter disconnection, the CAD will immediately contact the residence and try to resolve the issue. The CAD will also help the consumer access any available financial assistance. Programs and protections include:

- The Low-Income Assistance Program, a year-round assistance subsidy that provides utility bill discounts or credits to low-income families.
- The Energy Crisis Intervention Program for eligible families that have received a disconnection notice and cannot negotiate or honor an existing payment plan.
- Emergency assistance from the Maine Department of Health and Human services when a disconnection is imminent.
- Low-income customers who must use an oxygen pump or ventilator at least eight hours a day may qualify to receive a utility bill credit to cover the cost of electricity for the device.

Customers who have difficulties paying their electric or gas bills should not hesitate to contact their utility to address the problem. If they are not satisfied with the result, they should call the Commission’s CAD at 800-452-4699.

No customer who takes appropriate action should lose his or her electric or gas service during the winter months when freezing temperatures pose a significant risk to health and well-being. A timely call to the utility or the CAD should prevent a disconnection from occurring.