

New Protection for Virginians with Serious Medical Conditions: *Grace Period for Consumers Who Can't Pay Electric or Water Bills*

Virginia utility customers who have a serious medical condition, or who share a household with a family member with a serious medical condition, now can get a reprieve from cutoffs when they cannot pay their water or electricity bills on time.

How can utility customers extend payment time?

Under a new Virginia law, customers who are unable to pay their electric and water bills on time can receive a 30-day extension before their service is terminated if they or a family member they live with has a serious medical condition. This extension is available twice in a 12-month period, and a customer can get two 30-day extensions in a row, for a total of 60 days. Utility companies can choose to give these customers more than 60 days before cutting off service, but the company must allow at least 60 days. Even though the payment time is extended, the customer is still responsible for paying the bill.

How does a customer qualify for utility cutoff protection?

The customer must have a serious medical condition or be living with a family member with a serious medical condition. A serious medical condition is defined as “a physical or psychiatric condition that requires medical intervention to prevent further disability, loss of function, or death.” The customer, the person with the serious medical condition, and a physician must complete a Serious Medical Condition Certification Form and send it to the utility company. The form can be found at http://www.scc.virginia.gov/publicforms/594/med_cert.pdf.

Customers should file the form with the utility company before they need the payment extension, and not wait until a cutoff notice is sent. But if the customer hasn't filed the form before receiving a cutoff notice, the customer should call the utility, describe the serious medical condition, and ask for the 30-day extension. The utility company must then give the customer 10 days to file the form. Once the form is filed, the customer will get a 30-day extension, which includes the 10 days during which the utility company was waiting for the form. The customer then should immediately request an additional 30 days if more time is needed.

What if utility service has already been cut off?

A customer can receive the protection even if service has been cut off, by sending the utility company a Serious Medical Condition Certification Form within 14 days of the cutoff. The utility company must turn the service back on as soon as it receives the completed form. The company cannot require the customer to pay a reconnection fee before turning the service back on. But the company can charge the customer on future bills for the reconnection.

As in other situations in which customers have difficulty paying, the utility company might suggest that the customer with a serious medical condition extension enter into a payment plan.

This flyer was produced by the Virginia Poverty Law Center in November 2011. For more information, contact your local legal aid office. You can find your office at www.valegalaid.org or by calling 1-866-534-5243.