



Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

Your Residential Utility Consumer Advocate

CONSUMERS' FACT SHEET

Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

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ESTABLISHING ELECTRIC & NATURAL GAS SERVICE



Electric and natural gas consumers are entitled to affordable, quality utility service. This fact sheet from the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, provides consumers with information about setting up electric and natural gas utility service.

Starting Service

To set up utility service, contact your utility. Your landlord, realtor or seller should know who your utility provider is and who to contact to set up service. Your utility will request the address and phone number of the account holder and the address receiving service, in addition to information about your credit history. Ask the utility when your service will begin and when you can expect your first bill. The utility is required to start service within three business days of your request. If you are building a new home, the utility is required to install new service within 10 business days of your request. The utility must notify you if setting up service will take longer than these timeframes.

Creditworthiness

Before setting up new service, your utility will need to establish your financial

responsibility and may run a credit check to verify your creditworthiness. To establish credit with the utility, you must meet one of the following criteria:

- ▶ Be a creditworthy property owner;
- ▶ Have a prior account with the utility within the past two years, and in the prior year of service; did not have more than two late payments, nor had service disconnected by the utility in the prior year; or
- ▶ Secure a guarantor, who is a customer of the utility, to pay up to 60 days of service if you should fail to pay your bill.

If you do not meet any of these criteria, you may be required to pay a deposit to establish credit with the utility. The deposit may not be more than an average 30-day bill plus 30 percent. If the utility keeps your deposit for more than six months, it must pay interest on the deposit. After 12 months, the utility will review your account and determine if the deposit should be refunded or credited to the account. When paying a deposit, the utility should send you a receipt with the following information.

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- ▶ Name;
- ▶ Address;
- ▶ Deposit amount;
- ▶ Interest rate to be paid by the utility for your deposit;
- ▶ Length of time the deposit must be held by the utility to qualify for interest; and
- ▶ Conditions for refunding your deposit.

Payment Assistance

If you need assistance paying your bill, you can enroll in payment arrangement and assistance programs. Ask your utility provider for more information.

- ▶ **Budget billing** programs are offered by the utility and help you distribute costs evenly on your bill throughout the year. Your account will be reconciled once a year, and at that time you may owe money or receive a credit.
- ▶ **Payment arrangements** are offered by the utility for residential consumers. These payment plans may include paying off the past due amount in three, six, or nine equal payments.
- ▶ **PIPP Plus** is a payment arrangement offered by the Ohio Development Services Agency

for consumers at or below 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. After applying for all other energy assistance programs, consumers can apply for this arrangement at their local community action agency. Visit www.oacaa.org or call (614) 224-8500 to find your community action agency.

- ▶ **Energy assistance programs** are payment programs offered by the Ohio Development Services Agency to income-eligible households. Programs include the Home Energy Assistance program, Summer Crisis Program and others.

Disconnection and Reconnection of Service

Your utility service can be disconnected at any time of the year for a variety of reasons:

- ▶ You have failed to pay your bill;
- ▶ You have moved from your residence or requested your service be disconnected;
- ▶ The utility has scheduled maintenance;
- ▶ The utility is repairing a dangerous condition; or
- ▶ You have damaged or interfered with the meter or the utility's property.



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You cannot be disconnected or denied reconnection based on the past due bills of a person who previously lived in your home. However, if you have failed to pay your bill the utility has the right to begin the disconnection process.

- ▶ The utility must provide you with a written notice at least 14 days before it disconnects your service. This notice may either appear as a message on your bill or be sent separately.
- ▶ The utility must attempt to contact you before the disconnection.
- ▶ Disconnection can be made only during normal business hours.
- ▶ During the winter heating season (November 1 – April 15) the utility must contact you in person, by phone or by mail, at least 10 days prior to disconnection.

To restore service, pay the amount due and any charges the utility may charge for reconnection. After proper payment, service must be restored by the end of the next business day.

Medical Certification Waiver

If you or someone in your home has a health condition that would be affected by disconnected utility services, you may seek a medical certification waiver from a medical professional. The waiver can be used to prevent disconnection up to three

times during a 12-month period. It can also be used to reconnect service if you have been disconnected within 21 days. Waivers must be completed for each case of disconnection or reconnection. Forms are valid for 30 days and are available from the utility or a public health facility.

Power Outages

If you have critical medical equipment that requires power, you may join your utility's list of critical customers before a power outage occurs. The list, updated annually, alerts utilities of critical medical equipment during an outage but does not guarantee anyone will be prioritized for power restoration. Contact your utility to join the critical customer list; most consumers send in a letter or complete an application with verification from a medical professional. Even if you are on the critical customer list, you should prepare a backup plan for a power outage.

Metering Issues

Meters measure the amount of electricity or natural gas you use and are used to determine the usage charges on your bill. Utilities are only required to take one actual meter reading every 12 months. If your meter reading is not actual, it is an estimate by the utility. It is good practice to request an actual meter reading, instead of an estimated reading, when you begin new service. An actual meter reading is only required when you start service if the meter has not been read within 60 days.



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The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts.

The state agency also educates consumers about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues.

For more information, please visit the OCC website at www.occ.ohio.gov.



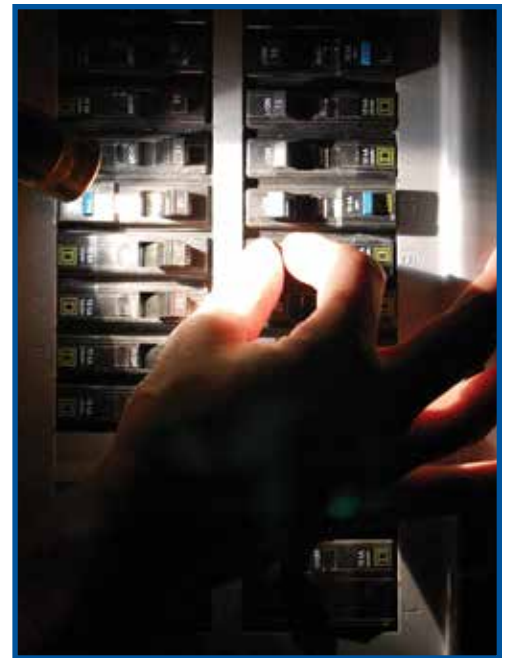
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If you suspect there is an issue with your meter, utilities are required to test your meter at your request. The test must be performed within 30 business days of your request. The first test is offered at no cost. You can be charged for additional tests that are requested within 36 months unless the meter is found to be inaccurate. If it is inaccurate, the utility must replace or recalibrate the meter, and the utility must credit your account for any overcharges within 30 days. If you have been undercharged because of a faulty meter, you may be billed for service in the past 12 months and required to pay the balance within 12 months. You have the right to be present when the utility tests your meter and receive an explanation of the results. The utility employee who visits your home must show identification.

Smart Meters

The electric power grid is being modernized into a “smart grid” through investments in smart meter technology. As part of the modernization, Ohio electric consumers are seeing their traditional analog meters replaced with digital smart meters. Smart meters record electricity usage and can also be used by utilities to conduct meter readings remotely. More capabilities for smart meter consumers may be available in the future.

You should be notified one day prior to installation of new smart meters. Consumers citing health or privacy concerns have sought to opt-out of having a smart meter installed. Utilities usually charge consumers a one-time fee and monthly charges to opt-out of receiving a smart meter.



PIPP Plus consumers

Consumers enrolled in the Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP Plus) have more standards and protections in establishing service. PIPP customers cannot be charged a deposit to establish service. In addition, former PIPP customers overdue on paying their PIPP payments will be responsible for paying those PIPP payments before they can reconnect their service. Former PIPP customers cannot be responsible for paying outstanding debt with utilities in order to reconnect service.

Visit the OCC's website, www.occ.ohio.gov, and look for more information in fact sheets like “Your Guide to Energy Disconnection and Reconnection,” “Electric Meter Reading,” “Guide to Understanding Your Natural Gas Bill,” “Keep Utilities on with a Medical Certification Waiver” and “The Facts About Budget Billing.” Renters can visit the OCC's webpage for renters, www.occ.ohio.gov/education/renting, for a utility guide to renting.