

Senate in Albany Votes Rights Bill For Utility Users

Bill Defines When Heat and Light May Be Cut

By ROBIN HERMAN

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ALBANY, July 3 — With the bill's sponsors asserting that gas and electric service "are not a luxury, but a necessity," the Senate tonight approved a measure defining the rights of consumers in their dealings with utility companies. The Assembly was expected to pass the measure later tonight.

The measure concerns installation and termination of service, billing procedures and billing disputes. It has been supported by the Governor, and an aide said Mr. Carey would sign it.

Under the bill, consumers who are approved for utility service must receive that service within five days — instead of the current 10 — and cannot be required to pay security deposits.

Companies must provide service to welfare recipients, even if they cannot pay, and the State Department of Social Services must cover up to four months of arrears and guarantee the payment for future services to such recipients. The payments would be guaranteed for no more than two years.

No Cold-Weather Cutoff

The so-called "Utility Bill of Rights" requires utility companies to follow specific procedures when they want to cut off gas and electricity. The companies are also prohibited from turning off heat during cold weather without first contacting an adult resident of the household at least 72 hours before shutoff. A utility cannot terminate service if a doctor has certified that a person in the household is experiencing a medical emergency.

The bill permits customers who are behind in bill payments to pay the debt on a deferred schedule keyed to their ability to pay. The legislation also limits a utility's use of estimated bills.

The companies are also required to annually inform customers annually, in writing, of their rights.

'Certain Basic Obligations'

The federally financed Public Utility Law Project, a statewide group representing the interests of low- and fixed-income utility customers, framed the bill about three years ago.

"What the bill does is to recognize that gas and electric service are not a luxury, but a necessity to which people deserve maximum access," said Assemblyman G. Oliver Koppell, a Bronx Democrat who sponsored the bill. "It is based upon the fact that utility companies operate under a monopoly granted by the state, and, thus, have to meet certain basic obligations to their customers." The Senate sponsor was Dale M. Volker, a Republican of Depew.