

METRO

Consumers' rights regarding utilities

The New York State Legislature this year passed legislation consolidating and extending law governing the utility-consumer relationship. The following "bill of rights" highlighting the new law were provided by the Public Utility Law Project.

1. Your utility company cannot ask you to pay everything you owe to avoid being shut off or to get gas or electric service turned on.

2. Your utility company cannot charge you for the debt of anyone else, even your spouse or roommate.

3. Whether you owe money or not, your utility company must provide gas and/or electric service if there is a medical emergency in your household.

4. During the cold weather your utility company must continue service if loss of service will cause serious health or safety problems for someone in your household who cannot take care of themselves.

5. If you are over 62, blind or disabled, your utility company must send a personal representative or contact you by telephone before you are shut off.

6. After Jan. 1, 1982, no utility company may ask you for a security deposit to get new service.

7. No utility company can charge you for service you used over six months ago, if they have never charged you for that service before and the failure to charge you earlier was their fault.

8. Your utility company must try to read your meter in every billing period.

9. Your utility company has to mail you a notice 15 days before they plan to shut you off. During the cold weather months, if you use

their service to heat your house, the utility must send a personal representative before shutting you off and again when they shut you off.

10. If you have been shut off, your utility company must restore service: (1) if a serious impairment to health or safety is likely to occur if service remains off, (2) if there is any doubt a serious impairment is likely to occur or (3) whenever there is a reasonable question raised about why or how the utility shut you off.

The Public Service Commission staffs a hotline, 1-800-342-3355.