



Heating Season Protections

Q: Can elders get protection from utility shut offs?

A: Yes, but the protections vary by how you heat your home.

If you heat with gas or electricity, there are shutoff protections for seniors---year round. Some other low-income households have limited protection during the period November 15 to March 15. The utility companies call this a "winter moratorium" on shut-offs. But if everyone in your household is over 65, the company cannot terminate your service for failure to pay a past due bill without approval of the Massachusetts Department of Telecommunications and Energy (DTE).

If you can't pay your bill all at once, you can work out a payment plan with the company. In addition, you have a right to a hearing at the DTE before termination. Utility companies are also required to give written notice of a shut-off to the state's Executive Office of Elder Affairs.

Elders may believe that their electric or gas heat cannot be shut off. This is technically not true. If the state approves the utility's request, you can be terminated-even during a "winter moratorium". But in practice, it is not likely that the state will approve a heating-related shut-off during the winter months.

There is also financial aid to help pay heating bills. Some seniors will be able to take advantage of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which can help pay for heating bills---whether you use gas, electricity, coal, oil, wood, or propane. LIHEAP assisted roughly 141,000 households last winter in Massachusetts. The program is managed by regional non-profit organizations. LIHEAP will provide fuel assistance payments for people with annual income of up to \$20,420 for a single person, and \$27,380 for a two person household. The maximum grant this winter is expected to be around \$609.

To sign up for the heating assistance program in your area, call the state "Hotline" at 1-800-632-8175 and enter your zip code. If you feel your gas or electric service has been improperly terminated, call the DTE at 1-800-392-6066. If you owe a company money, call the state Attorney General's office, at 1-888-514-6277. They will contact your utility or oil company and help you work out a repayment plan. Do it before the snow flies.