AMENDING THE IPUC CUSTOMER RELATIONS RULES

The Idaho Public Utilities Commission (IPUC) regulates investor owned utility companies in Idaho. (It does not regulate cooperatives or municipal utilities.) The IPUC makes the rules about how these utilities treat customers, and the rules have some important protections. The rules could be better, though, and we have some suggestions for how they could be improved.

Please read our suggestions, and let us know if you agree or if you have any other suggestions.

Winter Shutoff Moratorium

The current rule says that a utility can't shutoff a household's service during December through February if the household says they can't pay the full bill and the household has children, elderly, or infirm people in it. During the months of November through March, the utility has to offer the same households a Winter Payment Plan, and if the household makes the payments for that plan, the utility can't shut off the power during those months. The rule says that the utility doesn't have to turn the power back on during those months if it's been shut off before the moratorium begins, even if the household meets the moratorium requirements. The utility can shut off service to a family that would qualify for the moratorium right before the period starts, then refuse to turn the power back on unless they get full payment of whatever's due.

We propose:

1. The winter moratorium period should last from November to April. It's cold in Idaho longer than just December to February.
2. The utility should be required to turn the power back on for households that qualify for the moratorium, even if they don't pay all the money owed. The point of the moratorium is to protect vulnerable families, and the utility shouldn't be able to get around the moratorium by shutting off people's power just before it starts.

Medical Certificate

The current medical certificate rule says that the utility can't shut off your power for **30 days** if you give them a certificate from a **doctor or a public health** official. That certificate has to say that someone in the household is seriously ill or has a medical emergency, or that the person will become seriously ill or have

a medical emergency if the power goes off. The shutoff can be postponed for **30 more days** with another certificate.

We propose several changes.

1. the rule should allow certificates from **a nurse-practitioner or a physician's assistant authorized to diagnose and treat the medical condition described,** instead of just a physician or public health official with medical training. This change would simplify things for both the sick person and the doctors, would speed up the process, and would save money. Today's health care system relies heavily on physician's assistants and nurse practitioners for routine care, and there is no reason not to trust them with the certificates.

2. The rule shouldn't limit the exception to 30 days with only one renewal. Chronic illnesses and medical emergencies are not limited to 30 or 60 days, and requiring repeated certification wastes everyone's time and money. The certificate should state how long the person's medical emergency or chronic illness will last, and the utility should honor the certificate for that long. The rule should limit a postponement to **6 months for a medical emergency and no longer than 12 months for a chronic illness.**

Allowed Days and Times of Termination

The current rule says that the utilities can't shut off your power

- on any Friday **after 2 p.m.**
- on Saturday, Sunday, legal holidays recognized by the State of Idaho
- **after 2 p.m.** on any day immediately preceding any legal holiday
- at any time when the utility is not open for business

A utility can shut off your power **between the 4 p.m. and 9 p.m.,** Monday through Thursday, if they can't get to your meter during normal business hours. Otherwise, they can only shut your power off between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4 p.m.

We propose to change the rule so that:

1. the utilities would not be able to shut off power at all on Fridays **or days before legal holidays**.

2. the utilities would not be allowed to shut off your power between **4 p.m. and 9 p.m.** if they can't get to your meter during business hours. This rule

discriminates against low income working families, who can't always have an adult at home during regular business hours, or between 4 p.m. and 9 p.m.. When the utility shuts off the power after business hours, it charges extra fees for the after-hours shut-off, then extra fees to restore the power after hours. This is a huge extra cost to the household. Even worse, if the power is shut off after business hours, the family might not be able to get the power restored until the next business day, leaving them in the cold. The utility should have to find a better arrangement, instead of the household having to suffer for the utility's convenience.

Contents of Shut-Off Notices

The current rule says that the utility has to give you written notice ahead of time that they plan to shut off your service. The rule says that the notice has to include certain information.

We propose adding some information that the utility should include in the notice:

1. the notice should say **what time** the utility plans to shut off the service, so people can try to be at the house when the employee arrives

2. the notice should **explain the Hardship Exemption, Winter Moratorium and Medical Certificate so people know to apply for these exceptions to shutoffs.**

3. the notice should include this section written in the languages other than English most commonly used in the area:

> **IMPORTANT NOTICE: Your electric service will be shut off because of an unpaid bill on your account. You must call immediately to avoid shut off. If you are unable to read this bill, please have someone translate it for you. If you are unable to find someone to translate this notice, call NAME at NUMBER who will help you. Information about your rights as a customer and ways to stop your shut off are also available in this language. CALL NOW TO STOP YOUR SHUT OFF.**

Timing of Shutoff Notices

Currently, the rule requires the utility to diligently attempt to contact the customer in person or by phone 24 hours before shutoff. It also requires the utility to mail written notice seven days before shutoff.

We propose that the utility should have to try to contact the customer in person or by phone **at least twice** within 24 hours of shutoff. The utility should keep records of these attempts for 45 days, so that the IPUC can check that they're following the rule. Also, the utility should have to provide written notice at least **two weeks** before shutoff. People who get behind on their bills do so because they don't have money, and it takes people time to raise the money. This is especially true in rural areas, where driving to a bank or a loan office takes time, as well as driving to the nearest utility office to pay the bill. For working families, finding this time during business hours is really difficult.

Customer Rights and Responsibilities

Currently, the rule requires that utilities provide customers with a statement of rights and responsibilities when they open an account, and then once a year.

We propose

- that the utility should add to the statement:

    1. **how to prevent having your power shut off**
    2. **an explanation of the medical certificate rule**
    3. **availability of notices in languages other than English**
    4. **how to file an informal or formal complaints with both the utility company and the Commission**

- The rule should require the utility company to provide rate schedules, explanations of how to read meters, and information on selecting proper appliances for the particular service when a customer requests it.

- The rule should also require the utilities to ask new customers if they would like to have their notices in a language other than English. The rule should also require the companies to mail bills in the translated texts to those customers who request translated texts.

- The rules should require the utilities to post these rights and responsibilities, in English and Spanish, in any office that customers visit.

Rules that need to be added

Multilingual Notices

We propose that the IPUC require that utilities provide information to customers in **Arabic, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Russian and Vietnamese.**

Disconnect and reconnect fees

Currently, the rules don't mention disconnection and reconnection fees. Sometimes a utility charges both a disconnection fee and a reconnections fee. Some utilities even charge a disconnection fee and a fee for putting a disconnection notice on the door.

This is absurd. If a family can't afford to pay the bill, adding two big fees makes paying the bill more impossible. The IPUC and the utitlies should be working to make it possible for low income people to pay their utility bills, not making it more difficult. **We propose** that the IPUC should explain in a rule that disconnection and reconnection fees are unreasonable and not allowed.

For more information, or to comment on these suggestions, contact

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