



The seasonal bulletin of the Low-Income Energy Network (LIEN)

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- **New customer service policies to assist low-income gas consumers**

New customer service policy standards and practices specifically designed to help low-income residential consumers maintain their natural gas service came into effect January 1, 2013. LIEN actively participated in the Ontario Energy Board's consultation process which was initiated two years ago to develop the new customer service policies for the three rate-regulated natural gas distributors in Ontario – Union Gas, Enbridge Gas Distribution and Natural Resource Gas Ltd.

Eligible low-income customers must contact their gas utility company in order to access the policies which include:

- waiving of security deposits and late payment fees under certain conditions,
- a 21-day disconnection suspension if they are applying for LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance,
- year-round access to equal billing and payment plans, and
- access to arrears payment agreements.

An overview of the improvements to the gas utilities' customer service policies (both for low-income and general customers) is posted on the OEB's web site at the following link:

<http://www.ontarioenergyboard.ca/OEB/Consumers/Natural%20Gas/Gas%20Customer%20Service%20Rules>

The three rate-regulated gas utilities are also required to include these policies in their Conditions of Service documents (links below). Although the OEB is adopting a less prescriptive approach with the gas companies, they expect the utilities to comply with the policy standards and practices and will be monitoring customer complaints that may emerge.

<https://www.enbridgegas.com/homes/assets/docs/EGD%20Conditions%20of%20Service%20Updated%20or%20Jan%201%202013.pdf>

<http://uniongas.com/aboutus/policies/pdf/ConditionsofService.pdf>

http://www.ontarioenergyboard.ca/OEB/_Documents/For%20Consumers/NRG_Customer_Service_Policy.pdf

Kingston Utilities and Kitchener Utilities are not rate-regulated by the OEB. However, Kingston Utilities has decided to adopt the same low-income customer service policies for both its electricity and gas customers. Kitchener Utilities had indicated that it will voluntarily comply with aspects of the new low-income gas customer service rules given its smaller scope and scale compared to the two major Ontario gas distributors.

- **Electricity sub-meter providers to offer low-income customer service rules**

Unit sub-meter providers will be required to offer new customer service rules for residential and eligible low-income electricity customers similar to those offered by electricity distributors. These rules will come into force on March 15, 2013, and include provisions to:

- waive security deposits for eligible low-income customers,
- arrange for arrears repayment plans,
- suspend disconnection for 21-days if a low-income customer is applying for LEAP Emergency Financial Assistance.

For additional information on the changes to the customer service standards for electricity-sector unit sub-metering providers, please go to:

<http://www.ontarioenergyboard.ca/OEB/Industry/Regulatory+Proceedings/Policy+Initiatives+and+Consultations/Unit+Sub-Metering+Code+Amendments>

- **One-time funding of \$42 million to municipalities may be used for energy bill assistance programs**

On December 27, 2012, the Ontario government announced \$42 million in one-time funding for local housing and homelessness initiatives. This funding will temporarily restore some of the money that the government intended to save when it decided to eliminate the Community Start-Up and Maintenance Benefit (CSUMB) and transfer half of CSUMB funds to local municipalities.

CSUMB could be used to prevent disconnection of utilities (gas, electricity, water) or to restore utility services if there had been a disconnection of service. It could also be used for utility deposits.

Some municipalities across Ontario are creating new, local programs to make sure that people receiving social assistance continue to have access to funding for expenses that CSUMB used to cover. But many municipalities are not.

Now that the new funding has been announced, it is even more important to contact your local municipal councillors and urge them to make sure that a replacement program is created and that it can be used to access and maintain utility service. Local municipalities are in the process of creating their budgets for the next year right now, so make sure to contact them immediately.

For more information on the components of a good CSUMB-like replacement program, please go to:

<http://sareview.ca/isac-news/update-csumb/>

***LIEN Currents** is issued seasonally by the Low-Income Energy Network for members and others interested in solutions to energy poverty in Ontario. For more information, contact the LIEN Coordinator at bhanjiz@lao.on.ca or 416-597-5855 ext. 5167 or toll-free at 1-866-245-4182 ext. 5167. You can also visit our website at www.lowincomeenergy.ca*

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