




BENEFICIAL CHANGES TO THE OEB ELECTRICITY CUSTOMER SERVICE CODE FOR LOW-INCOME CONSUMERS



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PAST CHALLENGES

- Prior to these changes coming into effect, it was generally a gamble whether utilities would give social service agencies flexibility in terms of payment arrangements, security deposit waivers or even a brief extension. Utilities did not have to adhere to offering helpful measures that would go a long way in assisting a family facing an energy crisis.
- Most direct service providers felt that they were at the mercy of the utility when it came to asking for any special customer service measures.
- Often clients would get disconnected before agencies would have a chance to even speak to a supervisor.
- Fortunately, the OEB has taken a big “LEAP”  forward in ensuring that low-income consumers now have better opportunities to manage the increasing costs of their energy bills.

“LIENING” IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

- **Since 2004, LIEN has steadily been pushing to improve conditions for low-income consumers in the energy sector.**
- **After LIEN won a divisional court case in 2008 stating that the OEB *did in fact have “jurisdiction to establish a rate affordability assistance program for low-income consumers”* the eyes of the province’s energy sector were turned unto the plight of the low-income consumer acting as a catalyst for positive change.**
- **Though LIEN has not yet succeeded in encouraging the OEB or the MEI to implement a rate assistance affordability program, we have made great progress in the last 3 years for low income consumers and we will continue to appeal to the OEB until one has been established.**

TODAY & TOMORROW'S CUSTOMER SERVICE CODES

- Many of these code amendments are in force now and some will not take in force until October 2011.
- Be sure to refer to the OEB's website for exact details on the new customer service codes for low-income consumers and when they will become into force.
- LIEN's Energy Poverty Manual also contains a summarized section on these codes but only illustrates the codes that will have the biggest impact for low income consumers and the direct service providers who are advocating for them...similar to this content of this presentation.

There are many other new & helpful specific code amendments for low-income consumers and for all other consumers so please review the OEB website.

SUMMARY OF CUSTOMER SERVICE CODE AMENDMENTS FOR LOW INCOME ELECTRICITY CONSUMERS:

ASSESSMENT

- In order for clients to be eligible for these specialized customer service measures they must first be assessed to see if they qualify as low-income consumers.
- The client's pre-tax income must first be reviewed by a qualified Social Service or Government Agency using Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) plus 15% taking into account family and community size.
- A client is considered eligible to access all of following customer service measures provided their income falls at or below LICO plus 15%

ASSISTANCE BEFORE DISCONNECTION

- Information provided in the written Disconnection Notice, and in the telephone call 48 hours before disconnection, must include references to the special arrears payment agreement available for eligible low-income customers
- The Disconnection Notice, and telephone call 48 hours before disconnection, must also inform customers that emergency financial assistance and other programs are available for eligible low-income customers, and that more information is available from their electricity utility.

DISCONNECTION PERIOD

- You must be granted a disconnection suspension for 21 days after your electricity utility is notified by a Social Service or Government Agency that you are eligible for Emergency Financial Assistance.
- *Gives agencies time to negotiate the client's account, an opportunity to educate the client on the new customer service measures and upon assessing for low income eligibility, permits service providers to negotiate these measures for the client. Clients are no longer disconnected while trying to seek assistance. This amendment was initially formulated during the development of the LEAP program when LIEN and other agencies provided input to the OEB.*

SPECIAL ARREARS PAYMENT AGREEMENTS (APA)

- A down payment of up to 10% may be requested the first time you enter into a low-income customer arrears agreement or after having successfully completed a previous such agreement
- *LIEN requested that the down payment be completely removed in their last submission to the OEB, and though it was not removed it was reduced!*

Repayment Time Periods

- The time periods to repay arrears are extended to:
 - 8 months** if the amount you owe is less than or equal to 2 times your average monthly bill;
 - 12 months** if the amount you owe is more than 2 and less than or equal to 5 times your average monthly bill; or
 - 16 months** if the amount you owe is more than 5 times your

SPECIAL ARREARS PAYMENT AGREEMENT CONTINUED

Payment Default

- You must be allowed two payment defaults before a low-income arrears agreement can be cancelled.

Second or Further Arrears Payment

- If you are an eligible low-income customer and you successfully complete an arrears payment agreement, you can request a new agreement anytime needed thereafter.

* Reconnection of services upon entering an Arrears Payment Agreement

*Available to all consumers

SECURITY DEPOSITS

- **If you are an eligible low-income customer and your utility requests a security deposit, you may request a waiver.**
- *LIEN has been requesting to have security deposits waived since the network was formed...and after much work, the code amendment has finally been put in place.*
- **If you are an eligible low-income consumer and have previously paid your utility a security deposit, you may ask for it to be returned, after you've paid any outstanding arrears.**

See OEB Website for more details on security deposits

SERVICE CHARGES AND LATE PAYMENT CHARGES

- Service charges related to collection, disconnection, non-payment and/or load control devices are to be waived when you enter into a low-income customer arrears agreement for the first time or after you have successfully completed a previous such agreement.
- Outstanding late payment charges need not be waived by your utility when you enter into an arrears agreement; however, you cannot be charged additional late payment charges after you have entered into a low-income customer arrears agreement.

LIEN has been requesting to have these additional charges removed from low-income consumers accounts for years and has finally met success!

EFFECTIVE CUSTOMER SERVICE CODE AMENDMENTS AVAILABLE TO ALL CONSUMERS

- The OEB has also established some new customer service that all consumers can access that have proven to be very helpful to all energy consumers so please be sure to check their website.

<http://www.ontarioenergyboard.ca>

THANK YOU!!!

If you should have any further questions,
please do not hesitate to contact me at:

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