If your service has been shut off, it may be difficult to get it restored, and it may even be difficult to obtain new utility service from the same company if you move to a new residence. The utility will typically demand that you pay the old bill plus late charges, a reconnection fee, and often a deposit. Of course, obtaining utility service at a new address is not an issue where the landlord supplies the utility service at the new address or the utility service is in someone else’s name responsible for payments.

Here are some things to try when, because of unpaid bills, a utility refuses to restore service or denies you service at a new location.

**Dealing with an Old Bill.** If an old bill is several years past-due, it is possible that the utility cannot legally require you to pay it before providing you with new service. Also in some states the utility cannot require you to pay the old bill before they will give you service at a new address. Check with the utility commission or a local attorney. Filing of a bankruptcy immediately entitles you to restore service or to obtain service at a new address.

You can also ask the utility to allow you to pay off the old bill in installments over a period of months. If you are ready and willing to pay for future service as it is provided, and to pay for the old service over time, the utility should not have reasonable grounds to deny you this new service. Many states have specific rules addressing how much you’ll have to pay to get new service.

**Late Charges.** You not only have to pay the old bill, but also late charges related to that bill, in states that allow utilities to impose late charges. If late charges are very high, contact the consumer services division of your state public utility commission to challenge the amount or negotiate with the local utility about the amount. The utility may be more lenient in waiving old late charges if you present the reason you were having financial difficulties at the time.

**Reconnection Fee.** Try the same type of arguments and negotiation with reconnection fees as late charges. Some states prohibit or limit reconnection charges.

**Deposits.** Before establishing new or renewed service, the utility may ask you for a deposit, usually equal to the average bill for one to three months. If you believe that a deposit is too high, complain to the public utility commission’s consumer division. If you cannot afford the deposit, you can also request assistance from one of the sources of emergency assistance listed earlier in this chapter. When you have established a good payment record, request that the utility return the deposit to you with interest. Instead of a deposit, some utilities accept the signature of someone else, who agrees to be responsible for some or all of any payments you fail to make.

**Source:** National Consumer Law Center, Surviving Debt [50th NCLC Anniversary Edition], updated at www.nclc.org/library

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