

# Frequently Asked Questions

## Electric

### **1. Why are there so many electric outages?**

Catastrophic storms (severe weather), weather (lightning, heavy ice, strong wind), trees (in and out of right-of-way), equipment failure, public interference (dig-ins, car crashes, vandalism, third party contact), animals (raccoons, squirrels, birds) and scheduled maintenance are known causes of electric outages.

### **2. Can I be compensated by the utility for experiencing an electrical power outage even if it is the result of a severe storm?**

The MPSC has rules in effect that allow eligible customers to request a billing credit for lengthy and or frequent outages. There is a separate category for catastrophic conditions. This credit is for the interruption of service not for resultant damage. Eligible customers would request such a credit from the utility. A [Consumer Alert](#) highlighting eligibility is available. The rules allowing the credit are titled [Service Quality and Reliability Standards for Electric Distribution Systems](#).

### **3. What are the rules that apply to electric restoration if a customer is shut off for non-payment?**

After a utility has shutoff service, it shall restore service promptly upon the customer's request when the cause has been cured or credit arrangements satisfactory to the utility have been made. Except for reasons beyond its control, the utility shall restore service not later than the first working day after the customer's request. The utility may assess the customer a charge, including reasonable costs, for restoring services and relocating the customer's meter as specified in the utility's approved schedule of rates and tariffs.

### **4. Can the utility company estimate my bill?**

Utility companies are allowed to estimate a bill only if an actual meter reading cannot be obtained by any reasonable method. The Michigan Public Service Commission Billing and Payment Standards can be found on the Commission's website.

The Michigan Public Service Commission's Consumer Alert on estimated bills has additional information on estimated bills.

### **5. What are the guidelines for tree trimming?**

Utilities are required to trim trees to improve safety, efficiency, and reliability. The MPSC and the National Electrical Safety Code (NESC) require your utility company to trim trees that may interfere with overhead utility lines. (Untrimmed trees can result in outages, damages, injuries, and even deaths if not appropriately maintained). Michigan law states that a utility can gain what is known as a prescriptive easement. This means that the utility can gain access to power lines on private property without prior consent from the property owner. After a routine tree trimming job, the smaller pieces of debris may be turned into mulch, while the much larger pieces will be cut and left for the property owner to dispose of. The stumps are removed and then are cut as close to the ground as possible.

### **6. Does the MPSC regulate damages that occurred during storms and outages?**

The MPSC does not have jurisdiction over damage claims. This problem would need to be settled between the utility company, the customer, and possibly the customer's insurance company.

### **7. Can a customer avoid disconnection due to a medical illness?**

A utility can postpone the shutoff of service for 21 days at a time. The customer needs to produce a physician's certificate or notice from a public health or a social services official stating that the shutoff of service will aggravate an existing medical emergency with a permanent resident of the premises. This temporary hold will not exceed 63 continuous days in any 12-month period per household member or 126 days per household. Contact your utility company for details.

### **8. Am I required to give my social security number when applying for new service?**

A utility shall not require a customer or applicant to provide the utility with his or her social security number as a condition of obtaining or continuing a utility service. However, a utility may ask for positive identification which may include a picture identification, a driver's license, an ID card issued by the state, U.S. military card, military dependent's ID card, Native American tribal document of passport.

### **9. What can I do if the company will not make payment arrangements?**

Utility companies are not obligated to make payment arrangements (for example, if the customer has defaulted on a previous payment arrangement). However, utility companies rarely deny a payment arrangement. If you are denied a payment arrangement, you always have the option of locating agencies (for example, the Department of Human Services, Salvation Army, etc.) for assistance. You may also request the utility to provide a settlement agreement on the bill.

**10. If I can't pay the total bill can I make a partial payment to prevent my utility service from being shut off?**

Low income customers of a combination utility are permitted to designate how partial payments shall be applied to their account. If you receive a shutoff notice you have the following options:

- An extended payment plan for both gas and electric service and
- An extended payment plan to retain either your gas or electric service.