Your rights as a customer of a regulated telephone company in Illinois

Utilities #5
August 3, 2000
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclaimer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warning to all readers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to use this self help packet</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What utility service do you have?</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Options you may have when resolving a dispute</td>
<td>7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for a formal complaint hearing</td>
<td>9-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting financial help in paying your bill</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other publications on utilities</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What these legal terms mean</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the law in this area</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your rights</td>
<td>16-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myths</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tips</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Disclaimer — Please read

This packet of information was prepared to answer general questions and give general advice about the law in Illinois. This packet may or may not also include forms that you can use. When reading this packet or using the forms, keep in mind that the advice, information, and forms were created to assist readers with general issues, not specific situations, and as such does not replace the advice or representation of an attorney licensed to practice in the State of Illinois. Because of this and because of unanticipated changes in the law, the School of Law at Southern Illinois University and the person, institution, or agency who gave you this packet make no claim as to whether the use of this packet will achieve the result you desire and disclaim any responsibility for the consequences of any form prepared or action taken in reliance upon the information in this packet. If you are concerned or do not understand whether this packet will be of assistance to you or will apply to your specific situation, you should talk to an attorney who is licensed to practice in the State of Illinois. If you have any questions about this disclaimer,

Look for these symbols to tell you when to:

STOP!
You need legal representation or advice to continue.

USE CAUTION!
This is very important so pay attention.

GO!
You can proceed to the next step.

CHECK IT OUT!
This issue is discussed in another packet.
Warning to all readers

Before you proceed with using this packet, you should ask yourself the following questions:

1. Have I tried to consult a private attorney?

No self-help publication, packet, or form can replace the advice and experience of a licensed attorney. An attorney may not cost as much as you think, especially if you just need to ask questions. Before you proceed on your own, call several local attorneys, compare prices, and find out whether you can pay an attorney or not.

2. If I cannot afford an attorney, have I tried to find a free source of legal assistance?

There are several agencies which provide legal assistance for free to certain groups of individuals. Some of these agencies are listed to the right. While they may not be able to help you with a particular problem, it does not hurt to call them to find out before you proceed on your own.

3. Is this something that I can do on my own?

If you have trouble following directions, or have difficulty reading, writing, or speaking in public, you may not be able to follow the directions and advice in this packet. If this is the case, find a friend or someone who can help you before you proceed on your own.

Free sources of legal help

**Land Of Lincoln Legal Assistance**
Serves the 65 southernmost counties in Illinois
618-462-0036

**Prairie State Legal Services**
Serves most of northern and north central Illinois outside of Cook County
815-965-2134

**Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services**
serving Cook County
312-738-9494

**West Central Legal Assistance**
Serves Knox, Henderson, Stark, Warren, McDonough, and Fulton counties
800-331-0617

**Will County Legal Assistance**
Serving Will County
815-727-5123
How to use this self help packet

It is very important that you read each section of this packet completely before you take any action in regard to a legal problem including using any forms that supplement this packet.

Because this packet discusses terms and actions you are likely not familiar with, you will need to refer back to the following sections from time to time when reading this packet:

What utility service do you have?
This section describes the different types of utility services that currently exist in Illinois. You should read this section to make sure that you are using the right packet.

What these legal terms mean
This section defines commonly used legal terms in words that you can understand. To use the rest of this packet and any supplemental forms, you need to understand exactly what these terms mean.

Options you may have when resolving a dispute
This section discusses what steps you can take to try to resolve a dispute with a utility. You should read this section before taking any action on your own.

Your rights
This section discusses what rights you have as a customer of an unregulated or a regulated utility. You should read this section to see where you stand before you decide what actions you may or may not take on your own.

Myths and Tips
These two sections discuss commonly held misbeliefs about the law and steps that you should take (or not take) that could make your task easier.
What utility service do you have?

Municipal utilities:

A municipal utility is a utility which is owned and operated by a city, village, or town, and is not part of an investor owned utility such as Illinois Power, Commonwealth Edison, or Ameren CIPS. Municipal utilities are governed by the Illinois Municipal Code and whatever rules have been passed by the municipality.

Rural electric cooperatives

A rural electric cooperative is not a municipal or an investor owned utility. A rural electric cooperative is a not for profit corporation financed by the Rural Electrification Administration Act of 1963 which was designed to bring electricity to rural America. Rural electric cooperatives usually do not provide natural gas service. Rural electric cooperatives are governed by the Illinois Electric Suppliers Act.

Regulated utilities

A regulated utility is a utility which is required to follow the rules created by the Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC). Ameren, Illinois Power, and Commonwealth Edison are regulated utilities. An unregulated utility is a utility which is not regulated by the ICC. Almost all telephone companies are regulated. To determine whether your phone company is regulated or not, call the Illinois Commerce Commission at 1-800-524-0795. Regulated utilities are governed by the Illinois Public Utilities Act and Illinois Commerce Commission Rules.

Private suppliers

Some companies provide natural gas, cellular telephone, or propane service to their customers. These companies are unregulated and usually do not provide electricity service. Private suppliers are governed by the Uniform Commercial Code and the Illinois Consumer Fraud Act.
Options you may have when resolving a dispute with a regulated utility

Resolve the dispute on your own

**STEP ONE: YOU MUST CONTACT THE PHONE COMPANY FIRST**

If the utility representative cannot resolve your problem, ask to speak with his/her supervisor. If the problem is still not resolved you can talk to an attorney or you can go to STEP TWO.

**STEP TWO: CONTACT THE ILLINOIS COMMERCE COMMISSION: (ICC) WITH AN INFORMAL COMPLAINT: 1-800-524-0795 or (217)782-2024**

Ask for the Consumer Services Division. You will speak to a counselor who will then provide information about Commission rules and state laws which will handle your problem and if necessary will contact the utility and attempt to resolve your problem.

If you are not satisfied with the resolution or the problem remains unresolved, go to STEP 3. During STEPS 2 through 4, the utility cannot discontinue service if you pay the undisputed portion of the bill or pay for what you used during the same billing period last year. You must continue to pay all current bills.

**STEP 3: MEDIATION**

If a resolution is not reached through the informal complaint process, you can either try mediation (only certain companies offer this option) or go directly to STEP 4. If you choose mediation, an impartial mediator will help you and the utility come to a resolution. The ICC staff will recommend mediation if a resolution is likely. If you want to participate in mediation but cannot make it to the mediation site, you should bring this to the ICC’s attention. If mediation fails, you can go to STEP 4.

**STEP 4: CONTACT THE ILLINOIS COMMERCE COMMISSION: (ICC) WITH A FORMAL COMPLAINT**

Contact the Consumer Services Division again and tell them that you need to speak with your counselor. They will ask for your name and direct you to the person that you spoke with when you informally complained. Your counselor will talk to you and find out more information. Once your counselor is satisfied that you have done all you can do, they will give you authorization to request a formal complaint form from the Chief Clerk's office. After you submit the formal complaint form, a hearing will be set. If you prefer to write to the Consumer Services Division, send to:

Illinois Commerce Commission, Consumer Services Division  
527 E. Capitol Avenue, PO Box 19280  
Springfield, IL 62794

You will find a Reference Guide to help you prepare for a formal hearing on the next page. The form also tells you what your rights are if you lose at your hearing.
Options you may have when resolving a dispute with a regulated phone company

Small Claims Court

If your dispute is over an amount of money that you can pay (like a deposit, late fee, reconnection fee, etc), then you might want to consider paying the amount to get or keep your phone service connected, and sue your supplier in small claims court for a refund. If you cannot afford to pay the amount in dispute, then you may have to seek free legal assistance or the services of a private attorney. Please note that your chances of winning such a lawsuit are slim unless you can show that your provider violated a particular law or your contract with them for service. For a discussion on filing a claim in small claims court, see Packet #4 of the Court series.

If you cannot find free legal assistance or you cannot afford an attorney, then you are probably on your own.

STOP

Please note, however, that small claims court is really only set up for disputes over a particular sum of money. If your dispute is not over money, but over something else, you probably should seek the services of an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, you may have to consider other options, including trying cellular phone service.

Switching to cellular service

An increasingly popular option for persons whose phone service has been disconnected is to try cellular phone service. Consumers should be careful in exercising this option because the costs of such service, especially for local calls, are typically much higher than regular phone service and it is easy to have bills run into the hundreds if not thousands of dollars. It is usually less expensive just to save your money and pay off the bill you owe and have your service reconnected than it is to switch to cellular phone service.
Preparing for a formal complaint hearing

THE DECISION PROCESS:

• After considering the information presented by both you and the company, the Hearing Examiner issues a document called a Proposed Order. A copy of this order is mailed to both you and the company. The Proposed Order presents the Hearing Examiner’s judgment on the best way to deal with your complaint.

• If you disagree with the Proposed Order, file a written response (called a Brief on Exceptions) with the Commission's Chief Clerk and mail a copy to the utility’s attorney and the Hearing Examiner. (See Rules of Practice Sections 200.830 and 200.840).

• Similarly, if the utility disagrees with the Proposed Order, it will mail you, the Hearing Examiner, and the Commission’s Chief Clerk a copy of its written response. If you don’t agree with the utility’s response, you may file another response (called a Reply Brief on Exception) with the Commission’s Chief Clerk - and mail a copy to the utility’s attorney and the Hearing Examiner. (See Rules of Practice Sections 200.830 and 200.840).

• The Hearing Examiner will consider all responses and will, if necessary, change the Proposed Order.

• The Proposed Order is submitted to the seven Commissioners for their consideration. The Commissioners have the authority to accept, reject, or modify the Proposed Order and to issue a Final Order. The Final Order, which sets forth the decision of the Commissioners, is mailed to you and the utility.

REHEARING:

If you disagree with the Final Order, you may ask for a reconsideration (Rehearing) by filing an application within 30 days of the date the Final Order was sent to you. If your request is denied by the Commission, you may appeal to the Appellate Court. (See Rules of Practice Sections 200.880).
Preparing for a formal complaint hearing—cont'd

Setting the Hearing Date:

After you file a formal complaint, a notice will be mailed to you which states the hearing date. If you cannot attend the hearing on the set date, immediately call the Hearing Examiner working on your case to see if a different hearing date can be arrange. (See phone number on notice).

Witnesses:

If you plan to have witnesses testify for your case, you must notify them of the hearing date and you must make sure they come to the hearing.

Documentation:

Bring 3 copies of each document you will present at the hearing (bills, pictures, letter, etc.). If you think the utility has documents which will help you make your case, you have the right to ask the utility's attorney for that information.

Note: Your request should be made at least two weeks before the hearing.
Preparing for a formal complaint hearing - cont'd

At the Hearing:

You may use an attorney’s services, though it is not required. The utility company will, in most cases, be represented by an attorney. A Hearing Examiner, a staff member of the Commission, presides over the hearing. The Hearing Examiner will indicate when it is time for you or the company to speak.

1. You will present your case (testify) first. Because the complaint has been made by you, it is your duty to present testimony and/or documents that will help you make your case - that is, you have the burden of proof. In presenting your case, you may use witnesses and documents that relate directly to your case.
   
   Note: You and all witnesses will testify under oath. To build your confidence and to avoid overlooking key points, it is useful to prepare a detailed outline or completely write out your presentation prior to the hearing.

2. After you have presented your testimony, the utility is allowed to ask you questions about your presentation.

3. The utility then presents its witnesses and documents.

4. Next, you may ask the utility’s witnesses questions.

   Note: To be most effective, you should prepare questions before the hearing and while listening to the utility’s witnesses. Prepare and ask your questions in order to bring out facts that support your case, not to make statements or to accuse a witness. You may question only the witnesses, not the utility’s attorney.

5. When you are finished with step 4, you may again testify and present witnesses to challenge (rebut) the company's case. Then make a closing statement that summarizes the facts about your complaint and what you want done to correct the problem (refund, service restored, etc.).

   Note: If you do not want to again present witnesses or challenge the company’s case, go directly to your closing statement.

This completes the hearing.

* For specific filing requirements and hearing procedures refer to the Rules of Practice on the Illinois Commerce Commission website.

For additional information on the Illinois Commerce Commission and complaint procedures http://www.icc.state.il.us
If you need financial assistance in paying your utility bill or if you need help in getting your home better insulated or prepared for winter, you can contact the following agencies for help. Please note that these agencies do not have enough money for everyone and often run out of money. Furthermore, money is given on a first come, first serve basis, so don’t wait too long to call. All assistance is given based on financial need.

Alexander, Hardin, Johnson, Massac, Pope, Pulaski, and Union counties:

Shawnee Development Council, Inc.
PO Box 298
School Street
Karnak, IL 62956
(618) 634-2281 or (618) 634-2282

Williamson county:

Volunteer Services
410 West Main Street
West Frankfort, IL 62896
(618) 937-3581

Gallatin and Saline counties:

Wabash Area Development, Inc.
PO Box K
100 Latham Street
Enfield, IL 62835
(618) 963-2387

Jackson, Perry, and Randolph counties:

Western Egyptian Economic Opportunity Council
#1 Industrial Park
Steeleville, IL 62288
(618) 963-9031

342A North Street
Murphysboro, IL 62966
(618) 684-3541
Other publications on utilities

Disclaimer: Please Read !!

The following is a list of publications which discuss the issues of utilities. Some of these publications are specific to Illinois and others are more general in nature. Because of this and because of unanticipated changes in the law, the School of Law at Southern Illinois University and the person, institution, or agency who gave you this packet make no claim as to the accuracy of the content of these publications including whether they will achieve the result you desire. The School of Law at Southern Illinois University and the person, institution, or agency who gave you this packet disclaim any responsibility for the consequences of any action taken in reliance upon the information in these publications. If you are concerned or do not understand whether a particular publication will be of assistance to you or will apply to your specific situation, you should talk to the publication's publisher or an attorney who is licensed to practice in the State of Illinois. If you have any questions about this disclaimer, call the Self Help Legal Center.

Local Telephone Service: Your rights and responsibilities as a consumer;
Consumer Services Division, Illinois Commerce Commission
What these legal words mean

**case law**
A decision by a state or federal court which like a law is binding on its citizens.

**deferred payment agreement or payment plan**
When a person does not pay their monthly or a past due bill all at once but rather, pays it in installments over a period of months.

**deposit**
An amount of money that a utility asks a customer to pay before service is connected usually to ensure that at least one bill will be paid. In most cases, a customer with a bad credit rating or a bad record of unpaid or late utility bills will be charged a higher deposit. In some cases, the amount of a deposit is set or limited by law.

**disconnected**
When your utility service is stopped by the utility.

**estimated bill**
Sometimes the utility service cannot read your meter to determine how much electricity/water/gas you have used. It could be because of bad weather, a dog, a fence, an emergency. It could be because of your fault, it could be the utility's fault. Regardless of the reason, when the utility cannot read your meter, they have to "estimate" how much service you used and then bill you for it. While there are rules as to when and how a utility can estimate your service, estimated bills are legal.

**ICC or Illinois Commerce Commission**
The state agency which governs regulated utilities.

**statute**
An act passed by the state or federal legislature on a particular subject or action.

**tapped line**
When someone without the permission of the utility taps into an existing electrical, sewer, water, gas, or other utility line/pipe/wire to get service. Tapping can result in fines and in some cases can subject a person to fraud or criminal charges.

**utility**
A company which provides electric, natural gas, water, or sewer service is called a utility.
There are 4 laws which discuss utility service in Illinois. They are the:

**Illinois Municipal Code:**  
*(Chapter 65, Act 5, Section 11-117 of the Illinois Compiled Statutes)*  
The Municipal Code governs utilities which are owned and operated by a city, village, or incorporated town in the State of Illinois.

**Illinois Electric Supplier Act:**  
*(Chapter 220, Act 30, Section 1 of the Illinois Compiled Statutes)*  
The Electric Supplier Act governs rural electric cooperatives.

**Illinois Public Utilities Act:**  
*(Chapter 220, Act 5, Section 101 of the Illinois Compiled Statutes)*  
The Public Utilities Act governs only regulated (sometimes called public) utilities.

**Illinois Commerce Commission Regulations:**  
*(Title 83, Chapter I of the Illinois Administrative Code)*  
The Illinois Commerce Commission Regulations govern only regulated (sometimes called public) utilities including phone companies.
The following is a summary of the rights you have as a customer of a regulated phone company

Deposits:

New customers: If you have not had telephone service in your name for at least one year you can be asked to pay a deposit.

The telephone company can also require a deposit if you have failed to pay for past due telephone service and are not paying the entire bill before your service is reconnected.

If you have not had six months of service, the amount of your deposit may be based upon the average monthly residential bill. You may be asked to pay 1/3 of the deposit prior to obtaining service and you may be asked to pay this 1/3 in 12 days. You must, however, be given at least 2 billing periods in which to pay the rest of the deposit.

Present customers: You can be asked to pay a deposit if during the first year of service you are late with a payment 4 times or if your service is temporarily disconnected for nonpayment 2 times.

After the first year, you can be asked to pay a deposit if you are late with a payment 6 times or if your service is discontinued 2 times during any 12 month period.

The amount of a deposit cannot be more than twice your average monthly bill based on the past six months. You may be asked to pay 1/3 of the deposit within 12 days of the company’s request.

Refunds of deposits: Your deposit, plus interest, must be refunded to you after 12 months unless you have been disconnected for nonpayment; you have paid late 4 times in a twelve month period; you have fraudulently obtained service without payment; or you owe any past due bills.

Note: You are considered to be a present customer as long as your service is not permanently disconnected. Permanently disconnected means that you have been disconnected for more than 10 days. Once you are permanently disconnected, you become a new customer. If you are simply transferring service from one location to another location that is within the company’s service territory, then you are still a present customer.

If you disagree with the amount of a deposit, go to PAGE 7-8.
Your rights

Problems with past due bills and late charges:

You are allowed 21 days from the postmark of your first bill to pay the bill. After 21 days, a bill is considered past due and the phone company may add a late charge. When a late charge is added, however, it can only be 1½% of the unpaid balance. If you have a dispute over whether a bill is past due or over a late charge, go to PAGES 7-8.

Deferred Payment Agreements:

The telephone company must offer you a payment plan as long as your service is still connected and you have not made and broken a Deferred Payment Agreement in the past 12 months. Once service is disconnected, however, you no longer have a right to a payment plan, although the company may agree to one if it so chooses. The telephone company may require you to make a down payment of not more than 25% of the total past due amount and must allow you at least 4 months to pay the remaining past due amount.

Please remember the following rules about Deferred Payment Agreements

1. The amount of time that you are allowed to pay off your past due amount will vary according to the size of the bill, your ability to pay, your previous payment record, and the reasons for your late payments.

2. Late charges will be applied against any amounts past due.

3. Finally, and most importantly, during the Deferred Payment Agreement period, you must pay your current bills as well. Both the deferred payment plus the current bill must be paid by the due date.

If you fail to pay on a deferred payment agreement, all past due amounts become owed immediately and you may be disconnected.

If you have a dispute regarding a deferred payment agreement, go to PAGES 7-8.

Being held responsible for someone else’s service:

Sometimes, the telephone company may try to hold you responsible for a bill which was not in your name. They may say that your spouse ran up a bill or that you lived in an apartment or house which ran up a bill that was not paid. You should know that you can be held responsible for a spouse’s bill if the bill was incurred while you lived together. Beyond that, you cannot be held responsible for someone else’s bill, unless you agreed to be responsible in writing or unless the person who ran up the past due bill is currently living with you.

You may think that you are not responsible for a call made from your phone if you did not know about the call or did not authorize the call. You should know that you are responsible for all calls made from
Your rights

your home phone whether you know about them or not and even if you do not authorize the calls. However, if you believe that someone has tampered with the lines in order to make calls from your phone, you should contact the phone company (see below). If you have a dispute over whether you are responsible for someone else’s bill, go to pages 7-8.

Problems with tampered lines/equipment and/or calls you did not make:

If you receive a bill showing that your phone bill has dramatically increased, or if you see a call you did not make, you should contact the phone company and they will investigate the call. Should the phone company discover that tampering of equipment or lines to receive service has occurred and that you cooperated in or knew about the tampering, they have a right to hold you responsible for the bill. Otherwise, you cannot be held responsible for any calls that were the result of tampered equipment or lines. If you have a dispute over whether you should be responsible for calls made from a tapped line or equipment, go to PAGE 7-8.

Phone blocks and phone codes:

Phone blocks and phone codes are security devices that some phone companies offer to help you prevent unauthorized long distance calls from your phone. The "code" allows long distance calls to be made, but requires a person to type in a 3-5 digit code before they can place the call. The "block", however, prevents all long distance calls and can prevent some collect calls as well. Please note that it may take several days to put either a block or a code on your phone.

Once a code is given to you, it is your responsibility to ensure that the code is not given to other persons. If someone finds out the code without your knowledge, you can be held responsible for those calls. If someone figures out the code even through trial and error, you also can be held responsible for those calls. If long distance calls can be made without the code, however, you should not be held responsible for those calls.

A block prevents all long distance calls from being made. You should not be billed for long distance calls made after a block was placed on your phone.

If you have a dispute over whether you should be billed for a call after a block or a code was placed on your phone, go to PAGES 7-8.

Getting disconnected:

The telephone company may discontinue or refuse service for any one of the following reasons:

1) Nonpayment of a bill;
2) Nonpayment of a deposit;
3) Tampering with lines;
4) Failure to keep a deferred payment agreement;
5) Not allowing a phone company employee to check equipment;
6) Not following a local ordinance or other laws regarding telephone service;
7) Fraudulently obtaining service without payment; or
8) If use of your equipment adversely affects the company’s service to others.

The phone company cannot disconnect you for failure to pay the past due bills of a previous customer unless they are living with you.

If the phone company decides to disconnect your service, it must mail you a Final Notice at least 8 days before the date of the disconnection. If it is hand delivered it can be 5 days before the date of the disconnection. If you have a dispute over your disconnection, go to PAGE 7-8.

PLEASE NOTE THAT UNLIKE GAS OR ELECTRICAL SERVICE, THERE IS NO FINANCIAL AID AVAILABLE TO HELP YOU PAY YOUR TELEPHONE BILL. LOW INCOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE (LIHEAP) CANNOT BE USED TO PAY TELEPHONE BILLS.

Getting reconnected:

The phone company can make you pay for all bills that are past due or they may allow you to enter into a deferred payment agreement (see page 3) before you are reconnected. The phone company can even require you to pay a reconnection fee and a deposit. You are, however, entitled to 1 free reconnection each calendar year.

If you have a dispute over a reconnection or a reconnection fee, go to PAGES 7-8.

Getting reconnected or preventing a disconnection because of a medical condition:

If your doctor says in writing that having your phone disconnected will aggravate a serious existing illness of any person who permanently lives in your home, the phone company cannot shut off your service for 30 days or they must reconnect your service if it has not been off for more than 14 days. The doctor’s letter must state the following:

1) the name of the sick person;
2) that the sick person lives in the home;
3) the name, business address, and telephone number of the doctor;
4) the kind of illness; and
5) the period of time that not having phone service will aggravate the illness.

Your illness certificate can be renewed for another 30 days if the doctor sends another certificate. Within 30 days you must also contact the phone company to work out a deferred payment agreement (see page 3). If you have a dispute over an illness certificate, go to PAGES 7-8.
Your rights

900 number calls and purchases:

The federal Telephone Disclosure and Dispute Resolution Act gives you the following rights regarding 900 number calls and telephone billed purchases from 900 or other calls.

You do not have to pay for calls to 900 numbers that do not follow federal regulations. To find out if the 900 number you were calling was following federal regulations, call your local phone company.

You have the right to question charges for 900 number calls or purchases. You can do this by calling or writing to your phone company or long distance carrier. Should you question a call or charge, the phone company or long distance carrier must respond to your request within 40 days. During investigation, your account will be credited for the disputed amount. If a billing error has occurred, the phone company or long distance carrier must correct the error and notify you. If there is no billing error, your phone company or long distance carrier will provide you with a written explanation and upon request, provide you with documentary evidence of why you were billed for the charges in question. You then have 10 days to pay the disputed amount.

Please note that your long distance or your local telephone service CANNOT be disconnected if you choose to withhold payment for disputed purchases or calls to 900 numbers. If you have a dispute over a 900 number call, go to PAGES 7-8.
4 Commonly held beliefs about utility service which are not true:

I can’t be disconnected in the winter.
In Illinois, the phone company can disconnect your telephone service on any day regardless of the temperature or season.

As long as I pay something, my phone service cannot be shut off.
Unless you are in a payment plan and meeting the terms of your payment plan, payment of anything but the full amount of your bill can result in you being disconnected. Consequently, while paying “something” will keep your total bill down as well as show good faith on your part, it will not prevent your phone service from being disconnected.

They can’t make me pay a deposit to get service.
Yes, they can. While regulated phone companies have limits as to how much their deposit can be, all utilities, regulated and unregulated, can require deposits.

I can get service through my children or someone else’s name
Like tapping, getting service by using some one else’s name other than your own can lead to disconnection, a fine, or even a charge of fraud.

I can’t be charged for my roommate’s service
In almost all cases, if you were living with someone at the time the service was used, you can be held responsible for their bill.
Pay your utility bills first

If you are running low on cash, pay your rent/house payment and your utility bills first. The reason for this is unlike other bills (credit card, tv, etc), the worst that can happen is that you may have to shop somewhere else. In most cases, however, you only have one telephone, electric, gas, water company and if you don’t pay them, you may not be able to get utility service anywhere else unless you move.

Don’t let your phone bill get away from you.

While paying “something” on your utility bill might not prevent you from being disconnected, it will keep the bill down to a level that you can hopefully manage. If you find that you cannot afford phone service regardless of how much you save, you should consider changing or restricting your phone service to just local calls.

Get help if you need it

If you have trouble following directions, doing things on time, filling out forms, or keeping track of paperwork, trying to keep your phone service may be much more stressful than it needs to be. If, however, you have a friend you can help you do these things, the job will be a lot easier. Keep in mind, however, that a friend cannot take the place of the advice and experience of an attorney licensed to practice in the State of Illinois. Consequently, if you need legal advice or if dealing with the phone company proves to be too difficult a task for you, talk to an attorney.