



Backgrounder

Consumer protection, utility data and low-income support programs

Our Protection Mandate

The Ontario Energy Board is the regulator responsible for protecting energy consumers in Ontario. The OEB has a broad and comprehensive consumer protection mandate that includes:

- Establishing just and reasonable rates that ensure a secure supply of electricity and natural gas to all consumers;
- Establishing rules under which electricity and natural gas utilities must operate;
- Monitoring and inspecting the companies we license and regulate including utilities, and companies that sell energy under contract;
- Helping consumers work through issues they're having with energy companies;
- Investigating alleged violations; and
- Taking enforcement action if a company breaks the rules.

About Utility Reporting

The OEB sets rules and standards for utility performance. The OEB collects significant data to ensure utilities are meeting these rules and standards. The OEB also uses the data to assess trends and ensure that policies are meeting their objectives.

The OEB collects financial data, which is used for rate-making, reliability and safety, service quality data including call centre statistics and data to assess and monitor customer service rules and programs supporting low-income consumers.

Arrears and Disconnection Rules for Electricity Utilities

As part of the Ontario Energy Board's (OEB) commitment to consumer protection, we put into place robust rules that electricity distributors must follow if they are going to disconnect a customer. The purpose of the new rules and establishing standardized arrears management programs was to protect customers from unnecessary disconnections, give low-income customers a longer period in which to pay their bills, lower disconnection rates overall and reduce utility bad debt write-offs. Among them:

- Utilities are required to make arrears management programs available to residential customers who qualify and are unable to pay their electricity bill;
- Utilities are prohibited from disconnecting a customer who has agreed to an arrears management program and is current on payments;

- Customers must receive at least 10 days' notice from their local utility before their service is disconnected for non-payment; the disconnection notice has to contain information about options such as equal billing and arrears management programs and include additional information about assistance that may be available to an eligible low-income customer.
- The utility must make reasonable efforts to contact the customer in-person or by phone at least 48 hours before disconnecting them.
- The utility must suspend disconnection for 21 days if, at the time, the customer is being assessed for eligibility to receive emergency funding under the Low-Income Energy Assistance Program (LEAP).

For more detailed information, visit the OEB website at OntarioEnergyBoard.ca/BillHelp

- The OEB is here to help consumers. When received, complaints about an imminent disconnection are handled on a priority basis. The purpose is to avoid a disconnection if possible and to ensure that the OEB's rules have been followed before a disconnection occurs. For many complaints, the OEB is able to resolve the issue and avoid disconnection or arrange for a customer to be reconnected quickly.

About These Figures

Province-wide Customer Service Standards with rules to protect consumers facing disconnection by electricity utilities were established by the Ontario Energy Board (OEB) in 2011. To begin to test the effectiveness of these standards, the OEB required all Ontario electricity utilities to provide us with annual data on disconnections, reconnections, and arrears beginning in 2013. We have just started collecting the data. It will be used to assist the OEB in reviewing trends and determining the effectiveness of existing programs, policies and rules.

Moving Forward

The OEB has requested amendments to the Burden Reduction Bill, Bill 218, which would give the OEB more authority over how electricity utilities exercise their right to disconnect for non-payment. If passed, and as currently worded, Bill 218 would allow the OEB to make rules setting out periods when an electricity utility cannot disconnect a residential or small business consumer.

Support for low-income Ontarians

Financial investments are needed to ensure our grid meets the changing needs of today's energy consumer and is a reliable resource for future generations. The OEB has long recognized that this puts pressure on some families. Dating as far back as 2008, it worked with industry, low-income consumer advocates and set up a financial assistance working group to design assistance programs. That's why the OEB has programs in-place today to help low-income customers who are having difficulty paying their electricity bills including:

- The **Ontario Electricity Support Program (OESP)**, which is now benefitting more than 125,500 electricity customers across the province;
- Since 2011, the **Low-income Energy Assistance Program (LEAP)** has been providing emergency financial assistance in the form of a one-time grant towards an electricity or natural gas bill if a customer is unable to make ends meet in an emergency situation; and

- **Special rules** utilities must follow when dealing with customers with limited finances in addition to the 2011 Customer Service Standards including waiving security deposits, allowing longer payment times and more.
- **Energy Conservation** programs are provided by the Independent Electricity System Operator and delivered through local utilities to reduce energy use and lower overall household costs. See SaveOnEnergy.ca

More information on these programs is available at OntarioEnergyBoard.ca/BillHelp.

OEB urges all low-income Ontarians to visit our website at the above address to see if they qualify for its support programs.

About the OEB

The Ontario Energy Board oversees the energy sector in Ontario. We make sure electricity and natural gas companies follow the rules. Our objective is to promote a viable, sustainable and efficient energy sector that serves the public interest and assists consumers to obtain reliable energy services that are cost effective.

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