

## Utility Discounts

### Utility Discounts

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NOTE: Glossary words are highlighted. Click on any glossary word to see its definition.

### What are utility discounts?

Utility discounts are lower rates charged to low-income customers for gas, electricity, and telephone service. Massachusetts law requires regulated utility companies to offer discounted rates to customers who receive public assistance benefits and meet income limits. Customers with low-income rates get the same level of service as customers paying the standard rate.

Note: Municipal utility companies that are publicly owned do not have to offer discount rates.

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### Am I eligible?

To qualify for utility discounts:

- Your household income must be within the income limits (200% of the FPG)
- You must be getting help from an assistance program such as:
  - EAEDC
  - Food Stamps
  - Fuel Assistance (LIHEAP or H-EAT)
  - Head Start
  - MassHealth/Medicaid
  - Public or subsidized housing
  - School Breakfast/Lunch Program (free)
  - SSI
  - TAFDC
  - Veterans' Services
  - Veterans Non-Service Pension/DIC

- The utility bill must be in the name of the person getting assistance.
- You must be a residential customer.

### What are the income limits?

For most utility discount programs, households must have a gross annual income that is no greater than 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG):

Household size	2008 Income limits (gross annual income) 200% FPG
1	\$20,800
2	\$28,000
3	\$35,200
4	\$42,400
5	\$49,600
6	\$56,800
7	\$64,000
8	\$71,200
each extra	\$7,200

Note: Households that get certain public benefits such as TAFDC, SSI, MassHealth, or food stamps automatically qualify for utility discounts.

### What benefits will I get?

You will get lower rates for your gas, electric, and basic telephone service.

- For gas and electricity, the discounts range from 20% to 35% off the standard residential rate, depending on which utility company you use.  
Note: Your bill will usually say "R-2" or "R-4" if you are getting the discount rate.
- For telephone service, you will be eligible for Lifeline and Link-up discounts.

Lifeline offers telephone customers a discounted rate on their basic local monthly telephone bill. The Lifeline discount does not apply to long distance charges or cell phone service. Verizon Lifeline customers get a discount up to \$18.39 off their monthly bill for local flat rate or measured service. In addition, toll-blocking is offered free of charge.

Link-up pays half of the cost of phone installation, up to a maximum of \$30. It does not cover the cost of wiring inside your home.

Getting discount utility rates does not affect your eligibility for other assistance programs.

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## How do I apply?

There are several ways to apply for utility discounts:

- **Automatic enrollment:**

If you get benefits from certain public assistance programs, your utility company should automatically enroll you in its utility discount program. Some benefit programs, including fuel assistance, do not offer automatic enrollment.

Automatic enrollment works like this:

1. The utility companies give their customer information to the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA).
2. The DTA matches this information against the names of public assistance recipients.
3. The DTA tells the utility companies which customers qualify for discount rates.
4. The utility companies automatically enroll these customers in their discount rate programs.
5. The utility companies notify customers that they have been enrolled, give them information about the low-income rate program, and let them withdraw from the discount program if they choose.

If you are getting public benefits, check your utility bill or call your utility company to make sure you are getting the discount rate. Most utility companies use "R-2" or "R-4" for the discount rate. If you have not been automatically enrolled, you can apply directly to your utility company.

If you are a utility customer and do not want your information given to the DTA for automatic enrollment, you should notify your utility company that you want your name removed from the shared list. Otherwise your name will be included on the list given to the DTA.

- **Fuel assistance clients:**

If you get fuel assistance (LIHEAP) but do not get other public benefits, your fuel assistance agency will contact your utility companies for you.

Fuel assistance households automatically get utility discounts as long as the name on the utility bills matches the name of the person getting fuel assistance. If the names do not match, you should change the name on the bills, or apply directly for the discount rates (see below).

- **Applying directly:**

You may also apply directly to your utility companies for their discount rate programs. Some utility companies have online applications, or you can call and have an application sent to you.

Contact information for the major Massachusetts utility companies is listed in our Utilities Directory:

- o Massachusetts Utilities Directory

If your utility company is not listed, look on your bill for the Customer Service number. You may also call the Department of Public Utilities / Department of Telecommunications and Cable toll-free at 1-800-392-

6066. The DPU and DTC are the Massachusetts agencies that regulate gas, electric, and telephone companies.

The discount rate is given for one year and must be renewed. Renewal is automatic if you continue to get public benefits that use automatic enrollment. If you apply for fuel assistance each year, your fuel assistance agency will help you. Otherwise you must reapply on your own.

If you stop getting public benefits, you must notify the utility company that you no longer qualify for the discount rate.

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## Useful links

These links are external links to web sites that are not part of MassResources.org. When you click on these links, you will leave our site. Click "Back" on your browser to return.

1. **Help with Your Winter Heating Bill**  
From the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities, information about discount rates, shut-off protection, fuel assistance programs, and home energy conservation.
2. **Legal Tactics: Tenants' Rights in Massachusetts**  
From the Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, a 2003 handbook about tenants' rights in private housing. Chapter 6 - Utilities (requires Adobe Reader) has excellent information about utility service, shut-off protection, termination of service, discount rates, help paying your bills, and common problems.
3. **Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 164, Section 1F**  
Massachusetts laws about utility discount rates, including eligibility requirements, automatic enrollment, funding, and outreach.
4. **Utilities Advocacy for Low-Income Households in Massachusetts**  
Detailed information about utility arrearage management programs, shutoff protection, discount rates, payment plans, financial assistance, budget plans, and more. From the National Consumer Law Center, 2007 (requires Adobe Reader).

*Utility Discounts section last updated on 2/11/08*

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