



NEW JERSEY DIVISION OF THE RATEPAYER ADVOCATE

BILL OF RIGHTS FOR CONSUMERS IN THE ERA OF UTILITY COMPETITION

- All consumers must have access to reliable, safe, and affordable energy and telecommunications services.
- All consumers, including low-income consumers, must be ensured affordable energy and telecommunications services through appropriate state and federal policies.
- All consumers must receive the benefits of new services, technological advances, improved efficiency and competitive prices.
- All providers of electric, gas, and telecommunications services must be required to hold a license as a condition of doing business in New Jersey, and appropriate financial, operational, bond or other requirements must be established and enforced.
- Standards for protecting consumers in matters such as deposit and credit requirements, service denials and terminations, and deferred payment provisions must be applied to all service providers.
- All consumers must be protected from anticompetitive practices of providers of electric, gas and telecommunications services.
- All consumers must be protected from price increases resulting from inequitable cost shifting.
- Sufficient enforcement resources must be provided to ensure that consumers receive the benefits of this Bill of Rights.
- All consumers must be protected from unfair, deceptive, unconscionable and fraudulent practices on the part of any provider of electric, gas, or telecommunications services, including practices such as slamming, cramming, pyramid schemes, and deceptive information regarding pricing and terms and conditions of service.
- All consumers must be given unbiased, accurate, and understandable information concerning the price and terms of service, and in a form that allows simple price and term comparisons. This information must include disclosures about the generation resource mix and the environmental characteristics of their energy purchases.
- All consumers are entitled to protection of their privacy and must be protected from use of their consumers records or payment history without their express, informed consent.
- All consumers must have access to an independent administrative process that provides a simple, quick, and effective means of resolving complaints about service and bills from all utility service providers.
- Standards must be established to ensure quality service, so that all consumers will receive quality service, including a high level of customer service.

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The Division of the Ratepayer Advocate

introduces this Consumer Bill of Rights to focus attention on fundamental consumer rights that must be protected —no matter what form deregulation takes— if consumers are to continue to be guaranteed safe, adequate, and reliable service. We recognize that utility services affect the essential needs of New Jersey's ratepayers that must be protected at all times, notwithstanding competition. These principles have also been adopted by the National Association of State Consumer Advocates whose members are Advocates from states throughout the nation.

The deregulation of the electric, natural gas and telecommunications marketplace which is moving forward in New Jersey and nationally, means that consumers will soon have the option of choosing the companies that supply their electricity, natural gas and local telephone service.

Although competition is intended to bring consumers lower rates, new technology and better service, competition also raises unique con-

sumer protection issues, such as whether providers will have an obligation to serve low-income residents in dense urban markets or high cost rural areas and who will be responsible for resolving disputes between customers and their utility suppliers.

Because utility services are basic life-line necessities of modern life, New Jersey consumers of electric, gas and telecommunications services, must be assured of the consumer protections detailed in the Utility Consumers Bill of Rights.

“Ultimately, we will count the new competitive utility market place a success, if all consumers feel confident that services are affordable and reliable and that the choice of providers can be made with confidence that safe guards against fraud are in place and easily accessible dispute resolution is available.”

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