

Massachusetts Serious Illness Utility Shut-Off Protection For Providers

In Massachusetts, **electric, gas, and private water companies** cannot shut-off service in certain situations. This document explains one of them- serious illness protection. **Note: to qualify, the household must also prove financial hardship.**

- **What qualifies as a serious illness?**
Utility companies must accept as “serious” any medical condition that the doctor, physician assistant, nurse practitioner or local board of health considers serious. **An illness does not need to be life-threatening or disabling to qualify.** It is not uncommon for providers to submit letters for a patient who has an anxiety disorder or ADHD for example. Serious illness can include physical health conditions, mental health conditions or a temporary illness such as pneumonia or the flu.
- **Can I write a letter if I can’t establish utility service is necessary for treatment?**
Yes! You do **NOT** need to show that utility service is necessary for the patient’s treatment or safety. The law protects these patients regardless of specific need for the utility service.
- **The utility bill is not in my patient’s name – is my patient protected?**
The serious illness protection covers anyone in the household. The patient’s name does not need to be on the utility bill and they do not need to be related to the customer of record.
- **How do I write a serious illness letter?**
The letter should be written on letterhead, should include the date and the:
 - name **and address** of the seriously ill person
 - **The utility account number** and/or name of the person listed on the account
 - words “serious illness” or “serious chronic illness”
 - the utility may accept a letter that includes these words without the specific diagnosis or further details about the condition
 - business address, telephone number and signature of the certifying physician, physician assistant, nurse practitioner or local board of health
- **How long does protection last?**
Utilities must honor serious illness letters for 90 days and chronic serious illness letters for 180 days, but may honor them for longer. Letters can be renewed repeatedly. (**Note: landline telephone** providers may offer similar protections, but typically only for 30 days and can only be extended twice, for a total of 90 days.)

Sources and for More Information

- <https://www.masslegalhelp.org/housing/lt1-chapter-6-utilities.pdf>
- <https://www.masslegalservices.org/system/files/library/stay-connected-handbook.pdf>
- <https://www.masslegalservices.org/system/files/library/Utility%20Shut-off%20Protection%20guidance%20Nov.%202009-t.pdf>