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Hurricane Central: Ike

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Consumers get power-bill relief

PUC's Ike-related steps include halt to disconnections for those in a bind

By TOM FOWLER Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle
Sept. 24, 2008, 10:34PM

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A BREAK ON THE BILL

The state's three largest electric retailers are offering some payment relief to customers affected by Hurricane Ike:

- **Reliant Energy:** Extended payment deadlines and installment plans; suspension of late fees; moratorium on disconnections for nonpayment through the end of September, and a month longer in the hardest-hit

ZIP codes.

- **TXU Energy:** Deferred payment over five months of up to 75 percent of pending bills; payment of initial deposits in two installments for new customers in affected areas.

- **Direct Energy:** 15-day extension of bill due dates for customers in affected areas; payment of pending bills in three-month installments.

Customers in other areas may be eligible if they can show proof they were affected by the storm, such as insurance claims for home damage.

Prior to Wednesday's PUC action the three largest electric retailers, TXU Energy, Reliant Energy and Direct Energy already had offered customers affected by the storm some relief in the form of extended payment deadlines and installment plans.

The companies also have extended self-imposed summer moratoriums on disconnecting power to low-income or seriously ill residents for nonpayment.

Other retailers may be offering similar assistance. In all cases customers need to call the companies to make the arrangements, according to the companies.

Lisa Dornan, a spokeswoman for Direct Energy, said that while customers who fall behind on their bills now won't get disconnected, they should still try to make a plan for getting current. When the Public Utility Commission issued a moratorium on disconnections because of the heat in summer of 2007, many customers failed to catch up and ended up getting disconnected in the winter, many months after the moratorium expired.

"You don't want to get caught in that tailspin of balances that grow out of control with each month," Dornan said. "You need to ask for some payment arrangement you can live with."

Making such calls to a retailer may not always prove fruitful, though.

Earlier this month, PUC customer enforcement officials made calls to most of the state's retailers, posing as elderly customers hoping to take advantage of moratoriums on non-payment disconnects. Customer service representatives for all of the companies except one, TXU, gave callers incorrect information about the offers, or said incorrectly the deals weren't available.

Commissioners confronted representatives from the companies at a PUC meeting Sept. 11. Many retailers said call center workers had not been trained properly on the new offers. They promised to make improvements.

Commissioner Donna Nelson warned the companies that they needed to do a better job of keeping those promises or else officials might consider forcing companies to stop the service shut-offs.

"I'm not in favor of mandates, but we're going to be watching closely," Nelson said.

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Comments

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Texans who suffered the ill effects of Hurricane Ike may be able to get some short-term relief on their electric bills.

The Public Utility Commission approved measures Wednesday for customers in areas hit hard by the storm — including a moratorium on disconnections for nonpayment of bills and a waiver of deposits for customers signing up for new service because they were displaced by Ike.

Some retailers already had announced voluntary programs that include payment due date extensions and payment plans spread out over several months.

The PUC also will let transmission companies in the affected areas, such as Houston-based CenterPoint Energy, temporarily provide estimates of customer usage for up to three consecutive months. That's because many meter readers have been temporarily reassigned to help restore power.

Companies will rely on past usage patterns — namely how much power was used at the address during the same time last year — but with adjustments. CenterPoint officials said the company will try to adjust usage for September bills based on how long power has been out in certain neighborhoods.

So customers in storm-ravaged Galveston likely won't get bills equal to their full usage for a typical September but ones in Katy, where power outages generally have been shorter, might be billed based on an estimate close to a full month's usage.

Usage figures will correct over the coming months as meter reading ramps back up.

The PUC relief measures will be in effect for all Entergy-Texas customers in Orange, Jefferson, Chambers and Galveston counties through Oct. 10 and for customers in certain parts of CenterPoint's service area that suffered the longest power outages.



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