

UTL-3.02 - Financial Hardship Policy - [Printable Version](#)

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP POLICY

Administrative Rule Adopted by Water Bureau Pursuant to Rule-Making Authority

ARB-UTL-3.02

OBJECTIVE:

The objectives of this policy are to:

- Provide appropriate options for customers who want to pay their bills but do not have the financial resources to meet our standard expectations; and
- Ensure appropriate and consistent application of hardship policy.

Three categories of customers are defined as hardship situations:

- Low-income households responsible for paying a residential water and/or sewer bill may be eligible for financial assistance as determined by social agencies under Multnomah County criteria. Household income determines eligibility. The Bureau of Water Works' and the Bureau of Environmental Services' annual rate ordinances detail the amount of discounts available for qualifying low income single family residential customers under this program.
- Customers so close to financial assistance eligibility that their situation may be essentially the same as those who are eligible.
- Customers who don't meet financial assistance eligibility criteria and have a good payment history with the Bureau but who have extraordinary temporary circumstances that affect their ability to pay.

The desired outcome for all interactions include:

- Keeping the customer current
- Retiring the past-due amount
- Limiting unnecessary expenses (reducing usage, avoiding delinquency fees and shut-offs)

- Restoring the customer to good standing.

POLICY:

The Water Bureau will assist all customers in resolving past-due balances. Recognizing the impact the billing system problems have placed on some customers, a two-tiered approach will be implemented to respond to hardship situations.

Since tampering with a water meter is illegal, tampering with a meter disqualifies a household for financial assistance discounts and services for a period of one year.

The first time frame is from March 2003 to June 30, 2004.

- During this period we will continue to offer payment arrangement options as outlined in the payment arrangement policy and an approach to delinquent accounts outlined in the delinquent account policy. We acknowledge the customer impacts of our past billing system issues.
- On July 1, 2004, we will return to policies which are aligned with our previous actions prior to the billing system problems.

The following policy and procedures will apply from March 2003 through June 30, 2004:

- Customers who indicate financial problems in meeting water and sewer bills will receive information concerning the financial assistance program. If interested, customers will be referred to the appropriate agency for evaluation. The agency will take an application and make the determination as to eligibility and notify the Water Bureau of the results. The Water Bureau does not make the financial assistance determination.
- If the agency confirms a customer's financial assistance eligibility, the Bureau provides recurring discounts on water and sewer bill amounts and conservation counseling for a two-year period. At the end of that two-year period, the Bureau will send the customer a renewal application for financial assistance. If appropriate, an annual crisis voucher can be granted. If the account has an outstanding balance, a payment arrangement of up to 24 months can be offered with the requirement that the payment option and current bills be met in a timely manner.

- If the customer could possibly be financial assistance-eligible but has not completed the application to the program, a 2-week hold will be established while the customer completes the application and review process. If the agency confirms a customer's eligibility for the financial assistance program, the above process will be followed. If the customer declines to verify eligibility and/or is not eligible for financial assistance, the customer will not qualify for financial assistance hardship status.
- If the customer is not eligible for financial assistance, but he or she is close to the income requirements, a customer service representative may use discretion to offer up to a 24-month payment plan option. The customer will **not** receive financial assistance or other services of the financial assistance program. "Close" will be generally defined as within 10% of stated income guidelines.
- If a customer has extraordinary circumstances and a good payment history, we will offer the customer up to a 24-month payment arrangement with the requirement that the payments and current bills be met in a timely manner.
- Extraordinary circumstances will be broadly defined to include significant events affecting a customer's life and ability to pay. Water Bureau representatives will use best judgement in applying extraordinary circumstances and are expected to seek advice and confirmation from supervisory staff as needed. No documentation will be requested other than verbal descriptions by the customer. The representative granting approval must enter appropriate account notes.
- Customers have, at times, indicated specific existing medical issues as a reason to avoid water shut off action. A medical issue can be considered an extraordinary circumstance if written documentation from a medical doctor is presented. Completion of a Water Bureau Certificate of Medical Condition Affecting Water Service Shut Off will be required in order to grant any waiver to a water shut off action. (See attached cover letter and medical certificate).

The following policy and procedures will apply from July 1, 2004:

- Customers who indicate financial problems in meeting water and sewer bills will receive information concerning the financial assistance program. If interested, customers will be referred to the appropriate agency for evaluation. The agency will take an application and make the determination as to eligibility and notify the Water Bureau of the results. The Water

Bureau does not make the financial assistance determination.

- If the agency confirms a customer's eligibility for financial assistance, recurring discounts on water and sewer bill amounts and conservation counseling will be provided for two years. At the end of two years, the Bureau will send the customer a renewal application. When appropriate, an annual crisis voucher can also be granted. If the account has an outstanding balance, a payment arrangement of up to 12 months can be offered with the requirement that the payment option and current bills be met in a timely manner.
- If the customer could possibly be eligible for financial assistance, but has not completed the application to the program, a 2-week hold will be established while the customer completes the application and review process. If the customer is eligible for the financial assistance program, the above process will be followed. If the customer declines to verify eligibility and/or is not eligible for financial assistance, the customer will not qualify for hardship status.
- If the customer is not eligible for financial assistance, but he or she is close to the income requirements, we will offer up to a 12-month payment plan option. The customer will **not** receive financial assistance discounts or other services of the financial assistance program. "Close" will be generally defined as within 10% of stated income guidelines.
- If a customer has extraordinary circumstances and a good payment history, we will offer the customer up to a 12-month payment arrangement with the requirement that the payments and current bills be met in a timely manner.
- If any customer fails to meet the terms of a payment arrangement, the customer will be subject to the Delinquent Account Policy.
- Extraordinary circumstances will be broadly defined to include significant events affecting a customer's life and ability to pay. Water Bureau representatives will use best judgement in applying extraordinary circumstances and are expected to seek advice and confirmation from supervisory staff as needed. No documentation will be requested other than verbal descriptions by the customer. The representative granting approval must enter appropriate account notes.
- Customers have, at times, indicated specific existing medical issues as a reason to avoid water shut off action. A medical issue can be considered an

extraordinary circumstance if written documentation from a medical doctor is presented. Completion of a Water Bureau Certificate of Medical Condition Affecting Water Service Shut Off will be required in order to grant any waiver to a water shut off action. These customers will need to have current payment arrangements.

APPLICABILITY:

This policy applies to all customers of the Portland Water Bureau receiving water, sewer, and/or stormwater services. All managers, supervisors, and employees in the Water Bureau Customer Service Group will consistently apply the policy to customers.

HISTORY

Filed for inclusion in PPD July 8, 2003.

Adopted by Water Bureau. Document dated April 1, 2003.

Amended document dated August 13, 2003 filed in PPD November 6, 2003.