

Issue Alert
13-10-02

Program Area:	Department of Human Services (DHS), specifically State Emergency Relief (SER) energy assistance program	
Issue Summary:	DHS will now accept past due notices from applicants for SER. Previously, only shut off notices were accepted. DHS will no longer process applications for energy assistance SER during non-crisis months June-October. SER energy assistance will only be available from November-May.	
Persons Affected:	Low-income people facing utilities shut offs or arrearages.	
Date:	October 11, 2013	
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BACKGROUND

State Emergency Relief (SER) is available to help low-income households that can usually meet their needs but need help in an unexpected emergency situation. A majority of SER cases involve payments to assist households with utilities payments, especially heating and electricity during cold winter months.

WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Effective October 1, 2013, DHS must comply with the Michigan Energy Assistance Act of 2012. The Act instructs DHS to simplify its application, institute a program that encourages future self-reliance, and spend no more than 30% of emergency energy assistance funds outside the crisis season which runs from November to May. See ERB 301.

DHS enacted changes to its SER rules to comply with the statute. Previously, DHS required that applicants have a shut off notice from a utility provider before considering an application for energy assistance. In an effort to encourage applications prior to a pending shut off, SER groups can now apply for assistance with a past due billing statement.

DHS also instituted a new policy stating that no SER funds can be paid to applicants asking for energy assistance in non-crisis season months, from June to October. This means that some people with Winter Protection Plans might not be able to get assistance when their winter arrearages become due without shut off protection in the spring and summer months. Others might face shut offs without assistance if they become past due during warmer months.

WHAT SHOULD ADVOCATES DO?

1. Inquire about potential expansions to payment plan programs and “out of the box” payment arrangements instituted by energy providers in reaction to DHS’s decision to limit SER to the crisis period.
2. Educate clients and community organizations about these issues.
3. Help clients find legal advice if they need it.

WHAT SHOULD CLIENTS DO?

Immediately seek assistance from their DHS caseworker if they face a shut off during the non-crisis season to determine if they might qualify for programs other than SER. Be careful about energy use while on a Winter Protection Plan so the payments during the summer repayment period, when shut off protection expires, are affordable. Be proactive and immediately seek SER if they have a past due notice instead of waiting for a shut off notice.

FINDING HELP

Many legal aid and legal services offices assist with utility shut off cases, and they do not charge a fee. You can locate the “free” legal services or legal aid office that serves your county on the Michigan Legal Aid Web Site <http://www.michiganlegalaid.org/> or look in the yellow pages under “attorneys” or call the toll-free lawyer referral number, (800) 968-0738.