

A Plain Language Guide for DPU Customers

Proposed Customer Service Standards and Administrative Procedures
City of Richmond Department of Public Utilities – Article III Regulation

What is this about?

The City of Richmond Department of Public Utilities (DPU) is proposing a new regulation that establishes clear, uniform rules for how DPU manages customer accounts, reads meters, sends bills, collects payments, and handles hardship situations. This regulation also describes customer assistance programs, how to dispute a bill, and your rights as a customer. The regulation applies to water, wastewater, natural gas, and stormwater services.

★ *This plain language guide summarizes the proposed regulation. The complete text is available for review at the DPU Director's Office (730 E. Broad Street) and on the DPU website. You are welcome to comment before the regulation is finalized — see the contact information at the bottom of this guide.*

PART 1: Starting and Managing Your Account

1. What do I need to do to start utility service?

You must apply for service with DPU. Applications are processed within one to three business days. DPU will not discriminate in processing applications based on race, color, national origin, age, disability, or economic status.

2. Will I need to pay a deposit?

Yes, a deposit is required to establish service:

- Residential – Water: \$25
- Residential – Gas: \$50
- Commercial/Industrial customers: minimum of two times the residential rate for each service
- Customers with an existing outstanding balance must pay an additional deposit equal to that balance

If you close your account in good standing, the deposit is refunded one billing cycle after the account closes. If you have a past-due balance at closing, the deposit is applied to it.

3. Does my deposit earn interest?

Yes. The Director sets an interest rate each July 1. The starting rate is 0.25%. No interest is paid on deposits held less than six months. The rate in effect when your deposit is refunded applies to the entire time DPU held it.

4. Can property owners find out who has service at their property?

Yes, but only limited information is available. A verified property owner may learn:

- The name of the current account holder
- The date the current account was established
- The date any prior account was closed
- The type of service (water, gas, wastewater)

DPU will not disclose account balances, payment history, consumption data, or other financial information to property owners.

PART 2: Understanding Your Bill

5. How often will I be billed?

DPU aims to bill you monthly. Bills are based on a billing cycle of approximately 30 days, but the period may be up to 60 days. You will generally not receive more than three estimated bills in a row.

6. What if DPU cannot read my meter?

DPU will make at least two attempts to read your meter during each billing cycle. If access is not possible, a written notice will be left at your address explaining the reason and asking you to arrange access. If access remains unavailable, DPU may estimate your bill.

⚠ Important: If you block meter access for more than three billing cycles, you will not be eligible for leak adjustments for at least 12 months after access is restored.

7. What if my meter malfunctions?

If your water or gas meter stops working correctly, DPU will estimate your bill using your prior 12 months of usage history. For water accounts without irrigation or a pool, the new meter's actual readings may be used once one full billing cycle is complete. Your bill will clearly state when consumption was estimated.

8. In what order does DPU apply my payment?

Payments are applied in this order:

- 1. Security deposit (if owed)
- 2. Returned payment fees
- 3. Charges for damage or tampering
- 4. Past-due charges (stormwater → water/wastewater → gas → solid waste/recycling)
- 5. Current charges (same order as above)
- 6. Non-regulated fees

You may direct a payment to current (non-delinquent) charges once all items in steps 1–4 have been paid.

PART 3: Late Payments, Disconnection, and Protections

9. What happens if my bill is overdue?

DPU follows a step-by-step collection process:

- Step 1: A delinquency notice appears on your bill after your account is 45 days past due. The notice includes information about payment assistance and energy savings programs.
- Step 2: If no payment is received, your next bill includes a warning of pending disconnection or flow restriction.
- Step 3: After two delinquency notices with no payment, DPU may proceed with disconnection or flow restriction.

10. Are there times when DPU cannot disconnect my service?

Yes. Service cannot be disconnected in the following situations:

- Gas service: when temperatures are forecast at or below 32°F within 48 hours
- Water/wastewater service: when temperatures are forecast at or above 92°F, or at or below 25°F within 48 hours
- During a declared state of emergency (federal, state, or local)
- When a licensed physician certifies that disconnection would create a life-threatening situation (updated every 30 days)
- On Fridays, weekends, City holidays, or the day before a City holiday
- When you are complying with a payment arrangement
- When a billing dispute is properly filed and pending resolution

11. Can I set up a payment arrangement?

Yes. DPU offers payment plans based on your situation:

- No prior defaults in 12 months: 10% down, remainder in equal installments up to 12 months
- Financial hardship (documented 25%+ income reduction or high medical expenses): 10% down, remainder up to 24 months
- You must also pay your current charges on time while on a payment plan. If you miss a payment, DPU will notify you of intent to disconnect, and you will not be eligible for a new payment plan for 12 months.
- After six months of on-time payments, you may request that DPU reset the payment arrangement.

12. Can DPU waive interest charges on my account?

Yes, for residential customers who demonstrate good cause. Valid reasons include:

- Medical emergency (documented by physician)
- Involuntary job loss, death or disability of primary earner, or active military deployment
- Natural disaster or fire affecting your home
- Identity theft or fraud (documented by police report)

- A one-time financial crisis, if you have a good prior payment history
Submit a written waiver request within 60 days of the interest charge. You are generally limited to one waiver per 12-month period. DPU may also waive interest and fees when a billing error caused the delinquency.

13. What if my service was already disconnected?

DPU will work with you on a service restoration arrangement. Contact DPU directly to discuss your options. To restore service, you will generally need to pay the overdue balance or make satisfactory arrangements with the Director.

PART 4: Customer Assistance Programs

14. What financial assistance does DPU offer?

DPU administers several programs to help qualifying customers, including:

- MetroCare Utility Assistance Program – credits on water, wastewater, or gas bills for low-income households
- MetroCare Conservation Program – assistance with water conservation improvements
- Service Establishment Charge Waivers – waiver of certain reconnection fees for eligible customers
- Sampling/Survey Incentive Programs – programs that may offer incentives in connection with utility service improvement initiatives

These programs are funded subject to availability. Third-party agencies may be contracted to help administer intake and processing.

PART 5: Adjustments to Your Bill

15. What if I had a water leak? Can my bill be adjusted?

Possibly, yes. If you experienced an undetected water leak on the customer side of the meter, you may apply for an Excess Water Use Adjustment. Key rules include:

- You must have provided consistent meter access (see Question 6)
- The leak must be repaired and verified
- You may not receive more than one adjustment within any 12-month period, and no more than one adjustment for the same leak occurrence. An application must be submitted, and DPU will review your usage history

16. Can I get an adjustment on my wastewater bill for water that did not go down the drain?

Yes, in certain cases. If you use water for purposes such as irrigation, pools, or industrial processes where the water does not return to the sewer system, you may be eligible for a wastewater billing adjustment. You will need to install and maintain a Department-approved submeter to document the non-returned water. Submeters must be tested for accuracy regularly and certified annually.

PART 6: Disputes and Appeals

17. What if I disagree with a DPU decision or my bill?

You have the right to contest any adverse decision. Here is how the process works:

- Step 1: File a written dispute within 30 days of the decision. Clearly explain your reason and attach any supporting documents.
- Step 2: A Customer Service Manager or higher-level supervisor (not involved in the original decision) will review your case and issue a written decision within 10 business days.
- Step 3: If you are still dissatisfied, you may request a final administrative review within 15 days of the Step 2 decision. A presiding officer will review your case and recommend a final decision to the Director.

While your dispute is pending, your service will continue as long as you pay all undisputed charges on time. The disputed charges are suspended from your balance until a decision is made.

PART 7: Special Billing Services

18. Can I request a special billing format?

Yes. Special or customized billing formats are available to:

- Commercial/industrial customers or property managers with 10 or more accounts
- Government entities requiring specialized reporting
- Residential customers requiring accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (no fee)
- Residential customers requesting special accommodation

Services available for a fee include consolidated billing, electronic data interchange (EDI), customized consumption reports, and alternate billing cycles. Fees are assessed at 30-minute increments:

- Monthly reporting and bill management: \$50.00/hour
- Programming and technical services: \$90.00/hour
- Data entry and analysis: \$30.00/hour
- ADA accommodations: no charge

Important Things to Know

- Non-discrimination: DPU does not discriminate based on race, color, creed, national origin, sex, age, disability, or economic status.
- Meter access is your responsibility: You are required by City Code to provide DPU access to read your meter. Blocking access can affect your billing and eligibility for adjustments.
- Keep your contact information current: DPU relies on your contact details to send notices. Update DPU if your information changes or you need to cancel service.
- All assistance programs are subject to available funding.
- This regulation is reviewed annually to ensure it stays current with industry standards and applicable law.

Tips for a Good Experience with DPU

- Pay attention to delinquency notices — acting early gives you the most options
- Contact DPU at 804-646-4646 before missing a payment if you are having trouble — payment plans are available
- Keep records of your payments, correspondence, and any repair work
- If you dispute a bill, gather documentation before filing
- Always remember to establish utility service or cancel utility service each time you move
- Ask about assistance programs early — funding may be limited

For Questions About This Proposed Regulation:

Call: (804) 646-5209

Email: Lee.Crowell@RVA.Gov

Website: <https://www.rva.gov/public-utilities/rulesandregulations>

Director's Office: 730 East Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23219

(available weekdays, 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.)

Your participation in this process helps DPU serve Richmond customers better!

¹ This plain language guide is prepared in accordance with Section 2.02 of the Department of Public Utilities (DPU) Public Notice, Comment, and Hearing Procedures. The complete proposed regulation and additional information are available for public inspection as required by Richmond City Code Section 28-26.