

Public Policy Reforms

NCLC works closely with utility regulatory commissions, utility companies, and advocates for public policy changes so that low-income households can move beyond worrying whether their utility services will be shut off. More affordable utility service lowers overall housing costs, decreases homelessness and frees up resources that can pay for food, medicine, mortgage or rent payments, transportation to work, educational expenses, and other essentials.

1) Gas & Electricity Discount Rates

NCLC advocates were instrumental in getting Massachusetts to adopt low-income gas and electric discount rates which provide tens of millions of dollars annually in benefits to low-income residents of the state. NCLC has also successfully advocated for increasing the income eligibility limit for the discounts and the percent amount of the discount.

2) Arrearage Management Programs

In 2005, NCLC successfully advocated for a measure that required all Massachusetts utilities to offer pilot “arrearage management programs” to low-income customers. Under these programs eligible customers pay only their current bills, and for each payment the customer makes the utility applies a credit against the outstanding arrearage due for past bills. If the low-income customer keeps up with the current bill, eventually the utility’s credits will reduce the arrearage to zero.

There are now more than 20,000 households enrolled in arrearage management programs in Massachusetts. This forgiveness program brings dignity to low-income seniors, individuals, and families by helping them manage their bills. And utility companies recover money they likely would not have received.

3) Low-Income Weatherization Programs

NCLC provides advice and support to the Massachusetts nonprofits that deliver a range of energy efficient weatherization services to low-income households and advocates for adequate funding for the national weatherization assistance program. Weatherizing a home reduces a household’s energy bills by 25% or more, making the cost of heating and cooling a home much more affordable.

- Related publication: Stimulus Program Shines but Storm Clouds Are on the Horizon, Nov. 2012

4) Wireless Phone Services for the Homeless

NCLC is a national leader in advocating for changes to the federal telephone assistance program, Lifeline, so that homeless people can benefit from a subsidized wireless phone. Telephone service is essential for finding work and housing, and connecting with employers, social services, schools, medical care and emergency services; and for strengthening ties to family, friends and the larger community.

NCLC’s leadership has improved access to Lifeline for the homeless by successfully advocating for eligibility rules that allow shelter residents, those in transition housing and group housing, and those that have doubled up with other families to access the Lifeline benefit. We continue to fight for minimum standards for wireless Lifeline phones to ensure a quality product, participate in state

Lifeline proceedings and coordinate advocacy at the state and federal level for better wireless Lifeline products.