

Blowing hot and cold: Assistance with air conditioning costs



In some circumstances, utility assistance can help people with MS stay cool—without breaking the bank.

by Maureen Salamon

When the temperature rises above 72 degrees, life changes radically for Kirk Williams. Like approximately 70 percent of people with multiple sclerosis who are sensitive to environmental heat, Williams endures worsening symptoms whenever the mercury surges, indoors or out.

“Being overheated results in an inability to think clearly, to do anything but close my eyes and rest,” says Williams, 60, who was diagnosed with MS in 1999, six years after his symptoms began. “Heat makes a huge difference in my ability to function. Air conditioning isn’t just a nice thing—it’s something I need.”



Thanks to a successful legislative effort led by Kirk Williams, Coloradans who consume more power because of health conditions might be able to receive exemptions from tiered rates.

Photo courtesy of Kirk Williams

His sensitivity to heat propelled the Denver-area man to spearhead an intense legislative battle, along with National MS Society staffers in the Colorado-Wyoming area, when he learned in 2010 that Xcel Energy—the largest provider of residential electricity in Colorado—had instituted a tiered-rate system. Designed to reward electricity conservation efforts, tiered rates apply from June through September, and work on a graduated scale that charges increasingly higher rates to customers using more electricity—essentially penalizing people with MS who need to crank up their air conditioning each summer to keep heat-exacerbated symptoms at bay.

“To a certain extent, tiered rates really punish the MS community,” says Kara Hinkley, the Society’s manager of Southeast Advocacy. “It’s honestly dangerous. If people with MS forgo their energy needs, it may mean they’re out of work because of an exacerbation, or that they can’t pay for their medications because they’re paying for utilities.”

MS activists win exemption

After a three-year effort, the hard-fought legislation—Senate Bill 13-282—mandated Colorado’s Public Utilities Commission (PUC) to offer medical exemptions to tiered rates for those whose health conditions require higher power consumption. In addition to MS, several other conditions either trigger heat sensitivity or require medications that, as a side effect, induce it.

Scheduled to be implemented this summer, the new law will permit a medical exemption to

tiered rates for anyone in Colorado with a documented medical need, and an income of no more than 250 percent of the federal poverty level. This year, that equates to \$29,175 annually for one person or \$59,625 annually for a family of four.

Seeking a standard

All 50 states have their own version of a PUC, which regulates the utilities that provide essential services such as energy, telecommunications, water and transportation. PUCs must also approve any rate increases, but no national standard exists among PUCs to provide reduced rates or special pricing for people with medical conditions or income limitations, and some state PUCs may provide little if any relief for these groups.

California's PUC, however, goes as far as specifically mentioning MS in its policy, providing an increase in the amount of energy that can be charged at the lowest possible rate, called the "medical baseline allowance." Other states, such as Pennsylvania, offer energy assistance programs to help people experiencing medical emergencies or economic hardship to lower their energy usage or pay their bills. In Arizona, a federally funded program assists low-income households in paying their heating and cooling bills, with higher priority granted to those who are disabled.

"Each PUC varies quite a bit on their programs for people with medical needs," Hinkley explains.

Breezy ways to save energy

Even if your state's PUC doesn't offer a break on utility costs, several easy measures can help keep your house cooler and save energy during the hottest months:

- Close window drapes and blinds or lower shades during the hottest part of the day to keep the sun from heating the room.
- Adding awnings to south- and west-facing windows can reduce solar heat gain by up to 77 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. They cost around \$200 per window, but the upfront expense may pay off in the long run, depending on your specific home configuration.
- Apply film on windows that reflects the sun's heat back outside.
- Avoid using heat-generating appliances at midday, including the dishwasher, stove, oven, washer and dryer.
- If you do have air conditioning, close the doors to unused rooms (if you have window units) or close air vents in unused areas (if you have central A/C) so you're not paying to cool empty space.

If you're in the market for a new air conditioning unit, the U.S. Department of Energy offers helpful information and guidelines for selecting energy-efficient models. Visit energystar.gov and select "Energy Savings at Home." Then click on "Heat and Cool Efficiently."

Maureen Salamon is a New Jersey-based writer. She has written for The New York Times, CNN and other major outlets.

Do you want to help create medical exemptions in your state? Call the National MS Society at 1-800-344-4867 to see what your state is doing, or to get involved.

Check out what [programs may be offered for those with medical conditions/income limitations](#) in your state.