

## **Model Program Helps Older Adults Avoid Utility Liens on Their Homes**

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Across the United States, older adults are disproportionately homeowners: approximately 80% of adults over the age of 50 own their own home. This means that when elders fall behind on their utility bills, they are more likely to be subject to collection actions that result in a lien being placed on the home by the utility.

Advocates at the National Consumer Law Center (NCLC) have long been concerned about this problem as part of their advocacy work for [access to affordable utility services for low-income customers](#). Recently, NCLC staff entered into discussions with NSTAR, one of the largest electric and gas utilities in New England, to develop better approaches in attempting to collect on overdue bills of elders. The utility company agreed to launch a pilot program which will divert elders who own their homes-and who would otherwise face collections actions and liens-to get assistance from NCLC's partners on this project, the Boston-based [Legal Advocacy Resource Center](#) (LARC) and [Volunteer Lawyers Project](#).

Through its Massachusetts Senior Legal Hotline, LARC will offer a range of assistance to elders, including signing up with utility providers for low-income discount rates; enrolling them in NSTAR's arrearage management program (an incentive program that helps eligible participants pay down past due bills); and helping them apply for federal fuel assistance. An elder who participates will avoid facing court complaints and other collection actions that can result in a lien being placed on his or her home. In addition, for customers who successfully complete the arrearage management program-which provides credits against the overdue amounts for each month current bills are paid-NSTAR is willing to negotiate reductions on any interest that has accrued on past judgments and liens. The program will formally launch in January 2013.

Getting NSTAR's approval for this project proved relatively easy. NCLC approached a customer services vice president with the idea that it would not only help elders if they were diverted to the LARC program, but also the company itself by avoiding the costs of litigation and the minimal recoveries usually obtained if customers are taken to court. The NSTAR vice president agreed with that logic and directed her staff to work out the details with NCLC.

NCLC staff attorney Charlie Harak, who led the effort to develop this pilot, is happy to speak with advocates in any state who may wish to launch a similar program. **Send an email to:** [charak@nclc.org](mailto:charak@nclc.org).