



# TIPS

from the Consumer Health Action Network

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## **Managing Hospital Debt: What to do when you receive a hospital bill that you cannot afford.**

**Do not ignore the bill.** If you receive a hospital bill, it is important that you do not ignore it. Hospitals have the right to refer your bill to a collections agency if it is not paid. Instead, make sure to call your hospital's billing office right away to ask about payment options and financial discounts.

**Many Connecticut hospitals offer discounts on your bill.** You have the right to receive emergency care at hospitals, whether or not you have insurance. Many hospitals have programs called free care, free bed funds, or financial assistance programs which can pay for all or some of your care. These are special funds that the hospital received to provide care to patients who cannot afford to pay. Most of these discounts on your bill will be based on a sliding scale. This means that what you pay will be based on your income. Remember to ask about the program if the hospital does not tell you about it. You can apply even if you are not given information about the program when you visit the hospital.

**Contact the hospital's billing office to ask about these programs.** The specific office that deals with applications may be different at each hospital. Make sure to explain that you are calling to ask about free bed funds and financial discount programs. Also, make sure to record the name of the department you called, the name of the person you spoke with and the date. You may have to meet with a hospital financial advisor to go over the application process.

**Ask about setting up a payment plan so you do not have to pay your whole bill at once.** If the hospital does not have a discount program or you are not eligible, ask to set up a payment plan for your bill.

**Your hospital may ask you for the following documents and information.** Most hospitals will require you to apply for HUSKY or the State Administered General Assistance (SAGA) before applying for free care. Some hospitals require that you first be rejected from state assistance before you apply for free care. As proof, you will need the rejection letter from the Department of Social Services (DSS). Ask the hospital for help in filing the application.

**Don't forget to follow up with the hospital.** After you apply for the program, make sure to follow up with the hospital. Remember to write down the names of the people that you speak with so when you call back you will know who to ask for.

## **Some common questions answered:**

### **Do I have to have a certain income to qualify for these programs?**

Most of the programs are based on your family's income. Many of them require that your family earn under 250% of the federal poverty level, or \$41,500 for a family of three. Make sure you ask about the income guidelines and have information about your family's income and size ready.

**What does free care cover?**

Free care programs at every hospital are different. Some hospitals will cover 100% of the costs and others will cover 50% or 75%. The services covered vary too. Some programs may cover inpatient and emergency care only and others may cover outpatient and specialty care as well. When you call the hospital, ask which services are covered.

**Can I apply for free bed funds before visiting the hospital?**

Many hospitals will allow you to apply for free care before a visit to the hospital and before you receive a bill. Usually eligibility will last for 6 months. If you think that you may have to go to the hospital for a non-emergency visit, call the hospital and ask about applying for free care.

**If I get denied, can I apply again?**

The hospital must send you a written notice if you are accepted or rejected. If you are denied, you can appeal the decision or reapply at any time.

**Can HUSKY or SAGA cover the costs of past bills?**

Yes. If you receive HUSKY or SAGA within 90 days of visiting the hospital, HUSKY or SAGA may cover the cost of the visit. Contact your local Department of Social Services (DSS) office to find out more.

**What if I have private insurance now, but I did not have insurance when I visited the hospital?**

Make sure to explain your situation to the financial counselor at the hospital. If you did not have insurance when the bill was issued, you may still be eligible for financial assistance or free bed funds. Private insurance through your employer will not cover past medical bills from when you were not insured.

**What do I do if my hospital bill has been sent to a collection agency?**

If your bill is sent to a collection's agency, do not ignore phone calls from the collection agency. The collections agency should send you information about free care at the hospital. If you receive free care from the hospital, the debt collector should stop contacting you. Make sure to tell the collections agency in writing about your situation.

**What are my options if I feel that I have been unfairly billed or sued?**

Contact legal services at 946-4811 In New Haven or toll-free in CT 1-800-413-7796 if you think that your bill has been unfairly sent to the debt collector or if you have been sued. As of 2003, a hospital that has a free bed fund program is not allowed to sue you unless they have determined that you are not eligible for free bed funds.

**Who should I contact if I am having trouble obtaining information about free bed funds from the hospital?**

If the hospital does not respond to your application or you run into other problems regarding your billing, you should call your state senator or state representative. Also, you can call or write to the Attorney General's Office: (860) 808-5030 or Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, 55 Elm Street New Haven CT, 06106

**Please call The Consumer Health Action Network at 203-772-2817 or toll-free in CT at 888-873-4585 to ask any questions about hospital debt and about how to contact your hospital.**