

Consumer Bill of Rights Homeowners, Dwelling and Renters Insurance

AVISO: Este documento es un resumen de sus derechos como asegurado. Usted tiene el derecho a llamar a su compañía y pedir una copia de estos derechos en español.

What is the Bill of Rights?

This Bill of Rights is a summary of your rights and does not become a part of your policy. The Texas Department of Insurance (TDI) adopted the Bill of Rights and requires insurance companies to provide you a copy when they issue your policy.

Texas law gives you certain rights regarding your homeowners, dwelling and renters insurance. This Bill of Rights identifies your rights specified by rule or by state statute, but it does not include all your rights. Also, some exceptions to the rights are not listed here. If your agent, company, or adjuster tells you that one of these rights does not apply to you, contact TDI Consumer Protection at 1-800-252-3439 (463-6515 in Austin) (111-1A), P.O. Box 149091, Austin, TX 78714-9091. For a list of the specific law(s) and/or rule(s) summarized in each item of this Bill of Rights, or if you have questions or comments contact the Office of Public Insurance Counsel at 333 Guadalupe, Suite 3-120, Austin, TX 78701 (512-322-4143) or <http://www.opic.state.tx.us>.

This Bill of Rights does not address your responsibilities. Your responsibilities concerning your insurance can be found in your policy. Failure to meet your obligations may affect your rights.

Getting information from the Department of Insurance and Your Insurance Company

1. **INFORMATION FROM TDI.** You have the right to call TDI free of charge at 1-800-252-3439 or 463-6515 in Austin to learn more about:

- your rights as an insurance consumer;
- the license status of an insurance company or agent;
- the financial condition of an insurance company;
- the complaint ratio and type of consumer complaints filed against an insurance company;
- use of credit information by insurance companies, including which insurance companies use it and access to each company's credit scoring model;
- an insurance company's rates filed with the state;
- an insurance company's underwriting guidelines (subject to exemptions in the Public Information Act, also known as the Open Records Act);
- the Texas FAIR Plan, designed to help consumers who have been denied coverage by at least two insurance companies;

- Helpinsure.com, a service to help Texans shop for homeowners insurance;
- the Market Assistance Program (MAP) at 1-888-799-MAPP (6277), designed to help those in underserved areas obtain insurance; and
- other consumer concerns.

You can also find some of this information on the TDI website at <http://www.tdi.state.tx.us>.

2. INFORMATION FROM YOUR INSURANCE COMPANY. You have the right to a toll-free number to call your insurance company free of charge with questions or complaints. You can find this number on a notice accompanying your policy. This requirement does not apply to small insurance companies.

What you should know before you buy insurance

3. PROHIBITED STATEMENTS. Your insurance company or agent is prohibited from making false, misleading, or deceptive statements to you relating to insurance.

4. LENDER-REQUIRED INSURANCE. A lender cannot require you to purchase insurance on your property in an amount that exceeds the replacement cost of the dwelling and its contents as a condition of financing a residential mortgage or providing other financing arrangements for the property, regardless of the amount of the mortgage or other financing arrangements. In determining the replacement cost of the dwelling, a lender cannot include the fair market value of the land on which a dwelling is located.

5. CREDIT INFORMATION. An insurance company cannot deny you insurance solely on the basis of credit information. Insurers who use credit information must also consider other underwriting factors independent of credit information when deciding whether to offer coverage. (For additional information see the section of this Bill of Rights entitled *What you should know about insurance companies' use of credit information*.)

6. APPLIANCE RELATED WATER DAMAGE CLAIMS. An insurance company cannot deny you insurance or increase your premium based on a prior appliance-related water damage claim if:

- the claim has been properly repaired or remediated; and
- the repair or remediation was inspected and certified unless three such claims have been filed and paid in a three-year period.

NOTE: A claim includes a claim filed by you or a claim filed on your property.

7. WATER CLAIMS/MOLD DAMAGE OR CLAIMS. An insurance company cannot deny you insurance based:

- solely on a single prior water damage claim.
- on prior mold damage or a prior mold claim if:

- the damage or claim was properly repaired or remediated; and
- the repair or remediation was inspected and certified.

NOTE: A claim includes a claim filed by you or a claim filed on your property.

8. **PROPERTY CONDITION.** Voluntary Inspection Program: You have the right to have an independent inspection of your property by any person authorized by the Commissioner of Insurance to perform inspections. Once the inspector determines that your property meets certain minimum requirements and issues you an inspection certificate, no insurer may deny coverage based on property conditions without reinspecting your property. If an insurer then denies coverage, the insurer must identify, in writing, the specific problem(s) that makes your property uninsurable. You can find a list of available inspectors on the TDI website at www.tdi.state.tx.us/consumer/vipcommish.html or you can contact TDI for the list directly at (512) 322-2259.

9. **SAFETY NET.** You have the right to buy basic homeowners insurance through the Texas Fair Access to Insurance Requirements Plan, also known as the Texas FAIR Plan, if you have been denied coverage by two insurance companies. Your property must meet certain requirements, and eligibility for FAIR Plan coverage must be re-established every two years. You can access a list of insurance agents who are authorized to sell this coverage on the Texas FAIR Plan Association website at www.texasfairplan.org or by calling 1-800-466-6680.

10. **WINDSTORM COVERAGE.** For property located in areas designated by the Commissioner in certain counties on or near the coast, you have the right to buy windstorm and hail coverage from the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association. Your property must meet certain requirements, and the basic coverage is limited to a maximum amount set each year by the Commissioner of Insurance. This right applies whether or not you buy other insurance for your house. In all other counties your homeowners or dwelling policy includes this coverage. You may be able to purchase additional coverage from the Association.

11. **ELECTRONIC PAYMENTS.** If you authorize your insurer to withdraw your premium payments directly from your financial institution, including your escrow account, your insurer cannot increase the amount withdrawn unless:

- the insurer notifies you of the premium increase at least 30 days prior to its effective date and provides a postage paid form you can use to object to the increase; and
- you do not notify the insurer or financial institution that you object to the increase at least 5 days prior to the increase.

This does not apply to premium increases specifically scheduled in the original policy, to increases based on policy changes you request, or to an increase that is less than \$10 or 10% of the previous month's payment.

12. **NOTICE OF REDUCED COVERAGE.** If an insurer uses an endorsement to reduce the amount of coverage provided by your policy, the insurer must give you a written explanation of the change made by the endorsement. The insurer must provide the explanation before the effective date of the new or renewal policy. An insurance company cannot reduce coverage during the policy period unless you request the change. If you request the change, the company is not required to provide notice.

13. **NOTICE OF PREMIUM INCREASE.** If your insurer intends to increase your premium by 10% or more upon renewal, the insurer must send you notice of the rate increase at least 30 days before your renewal date.

14. **EXPLANATION OF DENIAL.** Upon request, you have the right to be told in writing why you have been denied coverage. The written statement must fully explain the decision, including the precise incidents, circumstances, or risk factors that disqualified you. It must also state the sources of information used.

NOTE: The obligation to provide a written explanation applies to insurance companies directly. An independent agent does not have a specific duty to quote the lowest possible rate to a consumer or to provide a written statement explaining why the agent did not offer the consumer the lowest possible rate.

15. **RATE DIFFERENTIAL WITHIN A COUNTY.** If an insurer subdivides a county for the purposes of charging different rates for each subdivision, the difference between the lowest and the highest rate cannot exceed 15% unless actuarially justified.

16. **RIGHT TO PRIVACY.** You have the right to prevent an insurance company, agent, adjuster or financial institution from disclosing your personal financial information to companies that are not affiliated with the insurance company or financial institution. Some examples are income, social security number, credit history and premium payment history.

If you apply for a policy, the insurance company or financial institution must notify you if it intends to share financial information about you and give you at least 30 days to refuse. This refusal is called “opting out.” If you buy a policy, the insurance company or financial institution must tell you what information it collects about you and whether it intends to share any of the information, and give you at least 30 days to opt out. Agents and adjusters who intend to share your information with anyone other than the insurance company or financial institution must give you similar notices.

You can opt out at any time. Your decision to opt out remains in effect unless you revoke it.

These protections do not apply to information:

- publicly available elsewhere;
- insurance companies or financial institutions are required by law to disclose; or

- insurance companies or financial institutions must share in order to conduct ordinary business activities.

What you should know about cancellation and nonrenewal

Cancellation means that **before the end** of the policy period the insurance company:

- terminates the policy;
- reduces or restricts coverage under the policy; or
- refuses to provide additional coverage to which you are entitled under the policy.

Refusal to renew and **non-renewal** mean the policy terminates **at the end** of the policy period.

The **policy period** is shown on the declarations page at the front of your policy.

17. *LIMITATION ON CANCELLATION FOR HOMEOWNERS AND RENTERS POLICIES.* After your initial homeowners or renters policy with your company has been in effect for 60 days or more, that insurance company cannot cancel your policy unless:

- you don't pay your premium when due;
- you file a fraudulent claim;
- there is an increase in the hazard covered by the policy that is within your control and results in an increase in the policy premium; or
- TDI determines continuation of the policy would result in violation of insurance laws.

If your policy has been in effect for less than 60 days, your insurance company cannot cancel your policy unless:

- one of the reasons listed above applies;
- the insurance company identifies a condition that:
- creates an increase in hazard;
- was not disclosed on your application; and
- is not the subject of a prior claim; or
- the insurance company rejects a required inspection report within 10 days after receiving the report. The report must be completed by a licensed or authorized inspector and cannot be more than 90 days old.

18. *LIMITATION ON CANCELLATION FOR DWELLING POLICIES.* After your initial dwelling policy with your company has been in effect for 90 days, that insurance company cannot cancel your policy unless:

- you don't pay your premium when due;
- you file a fraudulent claim;
- there is an increase in the hazard covered by the policy that is within your control and results in an increase in the policy premium; or

- TDI determines continuation of the policy would result in violation of insurance laws.

19. **NOTICE OF CANCELLATION.** To cancel your policy, your insurance company must mail notice at least 10 days prior to cancellation. Your policy may provide for even greater notice.

20. **POLICYHOLDER'S RIGHT TO CANCEL.** You have the right to cancel your policy at any time and receive a refund of the remaining premium.

21. **CHANGE IN MARITAL STATUS.** If your marital status changes, you have the right to continue your insurance coverage. You have a right to a new policy in your name that has coverages which most nearly approximate the coverages of your prior policy, including the same expiration date. The insurance company cannot date the new policy so that a gap in coverage occurs.

22. **USE OF CLAIMS HISTORY TO NONRENEW.** Your insurance company cannot use claims you filed as a basis to non-renew your policy unless:

- you file three or more claims in any 3-year period; and
- your insurer notified you in writing after the second claim that filing a third claim could result in non-renewal of your policy.

In determining the number of claims filed, your insurance company cannot include:

- claims for damage from natural causes, including weather-related damage;
- appliance-related water damage claims where the repairs have been inspected and certified; or
- claims filed but not paid or payable under the policy.

NOTE: An insurance company can count appliance-related claims if 3 or more such claims are filed and paid within a 3-year period.

23. **USE OF CREDIT INFORMATION TO NONRENEW.** An insurance company cannot refuse to renew your policy solely on the basis of credit information. Insurers who use credit information must also consider other underwriting factors independent of credit information when deciding whether to renew coverage. (For additional information see the section of this Bill of Rights entitled *What you should know about insurance companies' use of credit information.*)

24. **NOTICE OF CHANGE IN POLICY FORM.** Your insurer must notify you in writing of any difference between your current policy and each policy offered to you when the policy renews.

25. **NOTICE OF NONRENEWAL.** If the insurance company does not mail you notice of nonrenewal at least 30 days before your policy expires, you have the right to require the insurance company to renew your policy.

26. **EXPLANATION OF CANCELLATION OR NONRENEWAL.** Upon request, you have the right to a written explanation of an insurance company's decision to cancel or non-renew your policy. The written statement must fully explain the decision, including the precise incidents, circumstances, or risk factors that disqualified you. It must also state the sources of information used.

What you should know when you file a claim

27. **FAIR TREATMENT.** You have the right to be treated fairly and honestly when you make a claim. If you believe an insurance company has treated you unfairly, call the Department of Insurance at 1-800-252-3439 (463-6515 in Austin) or download a complaint form from the TDI at <http://www.tdi.state.tx.us>. You can complete a complaint form on-line via the Internet or fax it to TDI at 512-475-1771.

28. **SETTLEMENT OFFER.** You have the right to reject any settlement amount, including any unfair valuation, offered by the insurance company. You have the right to have your home repaired by the repair person of your choice.

29. **EXPLANATION OF CLAIM DENIAL.** Your insurance company must tell you in writing why your claim or part of your claim was denied.

30. **TIMEFRAMES FOR CLAIM PROCESSING AND PAYMENT.** When you file a claim on your own policy, you have the right to have your claim processed and paid promptly. If the insurance company fails to meet required claims processing and payment deadlines, you have the right to collect 18% annual interest and attorney's fees in addition to your claim amount.

Generally, within **15 calendar days**, your insurance company must acknowledge receipt of your claim and request any additional information reasonably related to your claim. Within **15 business days** (30 days if the company reasonably suspects arson) after receipt of all requested information, the company must approve or deny your claim in writing. The law allows the insurance company to extend this deadline up to **45 days** if it notifies you that more time is needed and tells you why.

After notifying you that your claim is approved, your insurance company must pay the claim **within 5 business days**.

If your claim results from a weather-related catastrophe or other major natural disaster as defined by TDI, your insurance company may take 45 additional days to approve or deny your claim and 15 additional days to pay your claim.

31. **RELEASE OF CLAIM FUNDS.** Often an insurance company will make a claim check payable to you and your mortgage company or other lender and will send it to the lender. In that case, the lender must notify you within 10 days of receipt of the check and tell you what you must do to get the funds released to you.

Once you request the funds from the lender, within 10 days the lender must:

- release the money to you; or
- tell you in specific detail what you must do to get the money released.

If the lender does not provide the notices mentioned above or pay the money to you after all requirements have been met, the lender must pay you interest on the money at 10% per year from the time the payment or the notices were due.

32. **NOTICE OF LIABILITY CLAIM SETTLEMENT.** Your insurance company must notify you if it intends to pay a liability claim against your policy. The company must notify you in writing of an initial offer to compromise or settle a claim against you no later than the 10th day after the date the offer is made. The company must notify you in writing of any settlement of a claim against you no later than the 30th day after the date of the settlement.

33. **INFORMATION NOT REQUIRED FOR CLAIM PROCESSING.** You have the right to refuse to provide your insurance company with information that does not relate to your claim. In addition, you may refuse to provide your federal income tax records unless your insurer gets a court order or your claim involves lost income or a fire loss.

What you should know about prohibited discrimination

34. **PROTECTED CLASSES.** An insurance company cannot discriminate against you by refusing to insure you; limiting the amount, extent or kind of coverage available to you; charging you a different rate for the same coverage; or refusing to renew your policy:

- because of race, color, religion, gender, marital status, disability or partial disability, or national origin; or
- unless justified by actual or anticipated loss experience, because of age or geographic location.

35. **AGE OF HOUSE.** An insurance company cannot refuse to insure your property based on the age of your house. However, an insurance company may refuse to sell you insurance coverage based on the condition of your property, including the condition of your plumbing, heating, air conditioning, wiring and roof.

36. **VALUE OF PROPERTY.** An insurance company cannot refuse to insure your property because the value is too low or because the company has established minimum coverage amounts.

37. **UNDERWRITING GUIDELINES.** Underwriting guidelines may not be unfairly discriminatory and must be based on sound actuarial principles.

38. **EQUAL TREATMENT.** Unless based on sound actuarial principles, an insurance company may not treat you differently from other individuals of the same class and essentially the same hazard. If you sustain economic damages as a result of such unfair discrimination, you have the right to sue that insurance company in Travis County District Court.

If your suit prevails, you may recover economic damages, court costs and attorney and necessary expert witness fees. If the court finds the insurance company knowingly violated your rights, it may award up to an additional \$25,000 per claimant.

You must bring the suit on or before the second anniversary of the date you were denied insurance or the unfair act occurred or the date you reasonably should have discovered the occurrence of the unfair act. If the court determines your suit was groundless and you brought the lawsuit in bad faith, or brought it for the purposes of harassment, you will be required to pay the insurance company's court costs and attorney fees.

What you should know about insurance companies' use of credit information

39. **REQUIRED DISCLOSURE.** If an insurance company uses credit information to make underwriting or rating decisions, the company must provide you a disclosure statement within 10 days after receiving your completed application for insurance.

The disclosure indicates whether the insurer will obtain and use your credit information and lists your specific legal rights, including:

- credit information insurance companies cannot use against you;
- how you can get reasonable exceptions that your insurer is required to make to its use of credit information if certain life events, such as divorce, death of a close family member, or identity theft, hurt your credit;
- the notice* an insurer must send you when making a credit-based decision that harms your ability to get or keep insurance or requires you to pay a higher premium; and
- how you can dispute credit information and require an insurer to re-rate your policy if the rate was increased because of inaccurate or unverifiable credit information.

* The notice must include a description of up to four primary factors that influenced the action taken by the insurer. Generalized terms such as "poor credit rating" are not sufficient.

Insurers must use the disclosure form (CD-1) adopted by the Commissioner or an equivalent disclosure form filed prior to use with TDI. The CD-1 is available at www.tdi.state.tx.us/company/pccrdtds.html or by calling 1-800-252-3439. Additional information regarding insurers' use of credit information is available at www.tdi.state.tx.us/commish/credit.html.

What you should know about enforcing your rights

40. **FILING COMPLAINTS.** You have the right to complain to TDI about any insurance company and/or insurance matter and to receive a prompt investigation and response to your complaint. To do so, you should:

- call TDI's **Consumer Help Line** at 1-800-252-3439, in Austin 463-6515 for service in both English and Spanish;
- write to the Texas Department of Insurance, Consumer Protection (111-1A), P.O. Box 149091, Austin, Texas 78714-9091;
- e-mail TDI at ConsumerProtection@tdi.state.tx.us;
- fax your complaint to (512) 475-1771;
- download or complete a complaint form on line from the TDI website at <http://www.tdi.state.tx.us>; or
- call the TDI Publications/Complaint Form order line (24 hours) at 1-800-599-SHOP (7467), in Austin 305-7211.

NOTE: TDI offers interpreter services and publications in alternate formats. Persons needing more information in alternate layouts or languages can call the *TDI Consumer Help Line* listed above.

41. **RIGHT TO SUE.** If an insurance company violates your rights, you may be able to sue that company in court, including small claims court, with or without an attorney.

42. **BURDEN OF PROOF.** If you sue to recover under your insurance policy, the insurance company has the burden of proof as to any application of an exclusion in the policy and any exception to or other avoidance of coverage claimed by the insurer.

43. **REQUESTING NEW RULES.** You have the right to ask in writing that TDI make or change rules on any residential property insurance issue that concerns you. Send your written request to: Texas Department of Insurance, Attn: Commissioner (113-2A), P.O. Box 149104, Austin, TX 78714-9104.