

**PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA 17120**

**Modification and Extension of Termination
Moratorium:**

**Public Meeting June 18, 2020
3020409-CMR
Docket No. M-2020-3019244**

**Natural gas distribution customers June 19,
2020**

**All other non-residential customers
July 1, 2020**

All other residential customers July 15, 2020

STATEMENT OF VICE CHAIRMAN DAVID W. SWEET

As my colleague stated, we are presently experiencing unprecedented times. To slow the spread of COVID-19, the Governor exercised his emergency authority to close schools and non-life-sustaining businesses and to impose a stay-at-home order. This Emergency Proclamation enabled state agencies like our own to waive laws and regulations that were not consistent with the goal of slowing the spread of the virus.

We know that many of our citizens have suffered greatly since the pandemic arrived in the U.S. Families have suffered through the virus itself and many have lost that battle. Many others have been afflicted with symptoms which endure for weeks and sometimes months. Those who avoided the virus may have suffered great economic losses when they could not work and could not obtain the unemployment compensation so desperately needed because the system was overwhelmed. People turned to working from home, sometimes teaching their own children in between conference calls, figuring out how to feed their families and obtain the supplies necessary to follow the health department's guidelines. Through all of this, the one thing that people did not need to fear was termination of utility service by utilities under the jurisdiction of this Commission.

This Commission stepped up and issued our Emergency Order which imposed a moratorium on utility terminations and encouraged utilities to reconnect those of its customers who had already lost service. Our authority to do this comes directly from the Governor's Proclamation, which was recently extended for an additional ninety days. This moratorium allowed Pennsylvanians to stay home, to work together to slow the spread of the virus, which aided in saving the lives of countless individuals.

Now, three months later, the economy of Pennsylvania is beginning to open and come back to life. This does not signal the end of the pandemic; it simply means that the health care system is not overwhelmed and that there are hospital beds for those who will need them. It means that we have learned that more businesses may operate safely through the use of social distancing, increased use of hand sanitizer and face masks. The pandemic is not over, we are simply learning to live with it. But the lifting of the moratorium at this time is simply premature.

I applaud the federal government's efforts to aid the public through this era when the most vulnerable were the hardest hit. The stimulus money and the additional unemployment benefits were

very helpful to many people. However, much of the money earmarked from the CARES Act has yet to be distributed.

It will take time for the most vulnerable citizens to pay off the debts that may have accumulated during the time when there was no paycheck. In the meantime, the virus persists. It is vitally important that people be able to stay in their homes, where they can continue to avoid crowds, telework, keep their children safe and occupied, and to do that, they rely upon continued utility service.

Some, not all, utilities under our jurisdiction have indicated that there are many of its customers who are behind on their utility bills, which means that when the moratorium expires or is lifted, those customers will be subject to termination. My colleague describes a notice of termination as the beginning of a conversation in which the utility can evaluate the economic circumstances of the customer and provide the appropriate assistance, whether it be a payment arrangement, placement in a customer assistance program, or eligibility for a grant.

While I agree with this sentiment, I would argue that there is no need to wait until a termination notice has been issued to start these conversations. It is not yet time to remove the extra level of security that comes from knowing that the lights will come on when they flip the switch, or the water will be there at the turn of a faucet. I firmly believe that a measured return to economic stability in the community will result in continued paychecks and payments to the utilities and maintaining the moratorium throughout that measured return will assist in that effort.

Furthermore, I do not find that the legal dispute between the Governor and the legislature creates the need to sever our Emergency Order from the Governor's Proclamation. As the parties to that dispute are working to resolve it, the Governor's Proclamation remains in effect and this Commission's actions should be based on that continuation and on our own assessment of the situation as a whole.

We know that some of our utilities, mostly the gas utilities, have experienced a lower number of customers who have fallen behind on their bills than last year. We do have data to support the statement that some of our utilities have experienced a higher number of customers who have fallen into arrears than were recorded last year at this time. However, we have no data to support the assumption that the situation is due to the moratorium rather than due to the pandemic. We have no data to support the assumption that there will be infrastructure improvement delays due to the moratorium, although it may well be that the number of available construction workers is decreased due to the pandemic.

In conclusion, lifting the moratorium on utility terminations would be premature at this time. Accordingly, I vote against the motion of Commissioner Coleman to lift our emergency order.

June 18, 2020
DATE



DAVID W. SWEET
VICE CHAIRMAN