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|  | COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION  P.O. BOX 3265, HARRISBURG, PA 17105-3265 | **IN REPLY, PLEASE REFER TO OUR FILE**  P-2020-3023238  M-2016-2554787 |

January 6, 2021

TO: All Parties of Record in Docket Nos. P-2020-3023238 and M-2016-2554787

RE: Petition of PPL Electric Utilities Corporation (PPL) to temporarily amend its current 2017-2022 Universal Service and Energy Conservation Plan (2017 USECP)[[1]](#footnote-2)

**Via email[[2]](#footnote-3)**

This Secretarial Letter grants PPL’s request to extend the temporarily increased income eligibility limits of its Operation HELP program from 200% of the federal poverty income guidelines (FPIG) to 250% of FPIG through December 31, 2021, subject to the conditions delineated herein.

*Background*

On March 27, 2020, PPL filed a Petition (March 27 Petition) with the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (Commission), at docket M‑2016‑2554787, requesting to temporarily increase the income eligibility requirements of its Operation HELP program[[3]](#footnote-4) from 200% of the FPIG to 250% of the FPIG through the end of calendar year 2020. PPL’s proposal was made in response to the COVID-19 emergency situation. On March 30, 2020, the Commission issued a Secretarial Letter granting the March 27 Petition.

*December 9 Petition*

On December 9, 2020, PPL filed the instant Petition (December 9 Petition), at dockets P-2020-3023238 and M-2016-2554787, requesting permission to extend the expanded income eligibility requirements for Operation HELP through the duration of its 2017 USECP. December 9 Petition at 2. PPL asserts that the Office of Consumer Advocate (OCA) and the Coalition for Affordable Utility Services and Energy Efficiency in Pennsylvania (CAUSE-PA) have been consulted and do not oppose this proposed request. December 9 Petition at 2.

As of November 30, 2020, PPL reports that it has issued $1,155,896 in Operation HELP grants to 2,167 customers and that approximately 12% of the grant recipients had an annual income between 200% of the FPIG and 250% of the FPIG. PPL further reports, as of November 30, 2020, that Operation HELP had a remaining budget balance of $919,793 and that PPL projects to receive donations estimated at $1.2 million in calendar year 2021. PPL states that the remaining funds are sufficient to extend the income eligibility requirements for Operation HELP until the end of its current 2017 USECP (*i.e.*, through 2022) under Operation HELP’s budget. December 9 Petition at 2.

PPL notes that many public health officials are warning of the danger that the COVID-19 pandemic presents during the upcoming winter months and that its customers will likely continue to face financial hardships in 2021. December 9 Petition at 2.

*Resolution*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission has supported efforts to temporarily offer energy assistance grants to customers not ordinarily eligible for such programs. For example, we have approved requests by Duquesne Light, Columbia Gas, and PECO Energy to temporarily increase their Hardship Fund program income eligibility limits. *See Petition of Duquesne Light to temporarily amend its current 2017‑2019 USECP*, Docket Nos. P‑2020‑3019460 and M‑2016‑2534323 (Secretarial Letter issued on April 17, 2020); *Petition of Columbia Gas to temporarily amend its current 2019-2021 USECP*, Docket Nos. P‑2020‑3022691 and M‑2018‑2645401 (Secretarial Letter issued on November 17, 2020); and *Petition of PECO Energy to temporarily amend its current 2016-2018 USECP*, Docket Nos. P‑2020‑3022124 and M‑2015‑2507139 (Secretarial Letter issued on December 17, 2020).

The Commission recognizes that households whose incomes exceed the eligibility limits for traditional energy assistance programs may be experiencing temporary financial hardships due to the COVID-19 crisis. This is consistent with the Commission’s actions at Docket M-2020-3019244 on October 8, 2020,[[4]](#footnote-5) when the Commission modified the moratorium on utility terminations and adopted enhanced consumer protections, including expanding the parameters under which utilities may not terminate service to customers with incomes up to 300% of FPIG, versus the standard 250% of FPIG that is applicable during the winter moratorium.  *See* 52 Pa. Code § 56.100 (concerning winter termination procedures).

With PPL’s 2020 Operation HELP funding remaining at over $900,000 and another $1.2 million program funding available for 2021, the Commission supports extending the expanded income eligibility requirements for Operation HELP into 2021. However, we are not persuaded to grant this extension through the end of 2022 or the duration of PPL’s 2017 USECP. PPL reports it has issued approximately $1.2 million in Operation HELP grants, as of November 2020, with the expanded income eligibility requirements that went into effect in April 2020. For the majority of 2020, most customers eligible for Operation HELP were protected under a statutory winter termination moratorium or a Commission-ordered termination moratorium. Many of these customers may have significant arrearages but have not applied for an Operation HELP grant because they were not at risk of potentially losing service. Therefore, we do not consider the Operation HELP spending level in 2020 representative of potential expenditures in 2021, when the Commission-ordered termination moratorium may be lifted and the need for energy assistance may be significantly greater.

Accordingly, the Commission hereby approves PPL’s request to extend the Operation HELP income eligibility requirements from 200% of the FPIG to 250% of the FPIG through December 31, 2021, subject to the following requirements.

* PPL shall file with the Commission and serve on all parties of record a quarterly status update, including the total number and total dollar amount of Operation HELP grants issued and the number and dollar amount of Operation HELP grants issued to recipients whose annual income is between 201% of the FPIG and 250% of the FPIG, and the total amount of Operation HELP funds remaining. PPL shall file these quarterly status updates beginning April 30, 2021, and continue through January 31, 2022.
* Should PPL seek to extend the increased income-eligibility requirements approved herein for Operation HELP beyond December 31, 2021, it shall file and serve a petition at the subject dockets with data to support such a request.
* PPL is directed to continue to reflect this temporary change in eligibility on its website and in communications with customers and other interested parties.

If you have any questions, please contact Regina Carter in the Commission’s Bureau of Consumer Services at [regincarte@pa.gov](mailto:regincarte@pa.gov) or 717-425-5441.

 Sincerely,

# Rosemary Chiavetta

Secretary

cc: Alexis Bechtel, BCS, [abechtel@pa.gov](mailto:abechtel@pa.gov)

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1. PPL’s current USECP, originally covering 2017 through 2019, was extended through 2022, pursuant to Commission order entered on October 3, 2019, at Docket M-2019-3012601. On January 6, 2020, PPL filed updated budget and enrollment projections for 2020, 2021, and 2022. Accordingly, the docket for PPL’s current USECP has been amended to reflect the additional years. PPL’s current 2017 USECP will remain in effect until its 2023-2027 USECP is approved and implemented. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Pursuant to Emergency Order, Docket No. M-2020-3019262 (entered on March 20, 2020; ratified on March 26, 2020; modified on July 27, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Operation HELP is PPL’s hardship fund and provides grants to residential customers who are low income with overdue balances and an inability to pay the full amount of their energy bills. Operation HELP operates year-round (funding-permitted) with ongoing corporate contributions and donations from PPL’s employees, retirees, and customers. *See* PPL’s 2017 USECP, Docket No. M-2016-2554787, at 68‑72 (filed on November 3, 2017). <http://www.puc.pa.gov/pcdocs/1543006.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ratified via Commission Order on October 13, 2020, at Docket No. M-2020-3019244. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)