



HEALTH, EDUCATION & LEGAL ASSISTANCE PROJECT: A MEDICAL-LEGAL PARTNERSHIP
WIDENER UNIVERSITY - DELAWARE LAW SCHOOL

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May 11, 2021

Re: Docket No. L-2015-2508421

Dear Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission:

The Health, Education, and Legal Assistance Project (HELP: MLP) is a legal services provider with locations in Philadelphia and Delaware counties in Pennsylvania. HELP: MLP partners with maternal and child health providers to improve families' health through legal interventions that focus on unmet needs that have health harming impacts.

One of the unmet needs we frequently witness among our families is utility insecurity. Utility insecurity and utility terminations have significant impacts on children's abilities to grow and thrive. Utility service is acutely necessary for the health and wellbeing of families with young children in particular. Medical certificates serve as an important safeguard for our patients who face a myriad of health problems in addition to the everyday challenges of being poor. Their health problems often keep them from working full time and make keeping up with ever-increasing housing, food, and utility expenses very challenging.

Our patients run the gamut from those who rely on medical devices for survival to those who need to keep life-sustaining medications refrigerated to those whose health would be put in jeopardy without access to heating or cooling service. For example, electricity is necessary for a mom who pumps milk for her baby. Extreme temperature fluctuations can be deadly for young infants. Refrigeration is necessary for safe storage of breastmilk and infant formula, as well as the preparation of fresh food for toddlers, young children and pregnant women. Our nurses have observed that when families do not have access to refrigeration, young children do not eat developmentally appropriate foods and begin to fall behind on motor milestones. One nurse worked with a family whose lack of access to refrigerated food meant that a toddler was still eating shelf-stable purees and had not developed a pincer grasp. These conditions - pregnancy, infancy, and early childhood - are all medically vulnerable "conditions," and losing access to refrigeration for needed nutrition is health-harming.

Additionally, the stress of a utility shutoff has long term negative impacts on children. A utility shutoff stresses parents, distracts them from the work of raising their kids and working outside the home, and it may cause a move to a less safe neighborhood, a breakup of the family as friends or relatives may not be able to house an entire family unit, or a call to child protective services. Families of color are disproportionately impacted by utility terminations, and the American Academy of Pediatrics has recently recognized racism as a public health threat. Utility terminations have long term, reverberating impacts on a child's life for years to come.



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As lawyers and nurses, we regularly support our clients in obtaining Medical Certificates from physician's offices. This process can be both onerous and embarrassing for our clients, whose requests are often refused by medical professionals. In our experience, medical professionals often decline to sign Medical Certificates due to a misunderstanding of their purposes or the time involved in obtaining and completing the forms.

We thank the Commission for the important work being done to make Medical Certificates more accessible for customers and medical professionals alike. We commend the Commission for creating a standard form.

With regard to the proposed form, we urge the Commission to change "affliction" to "condition" in the Request for Medical Certification (Appendix A). This change would be in line with the statute and is more comfortable for medical professionals signing the form. The word "affliction" implies something more severe than the statute necessitates. For example, a newborn child whose life depends on his parent having access to a refrigerator for safe storage of breastmilk does not currently have a diagnosable affliction. But a condition can turn into an affliction without adequate and lawful access to utilities.

We believe that making the Medical Certificate available on the Public Utility Commission website is an important first step in making the Certificate more easily utilized by customers. However, we urge the Commission to make the Certificate available on individual utility websites, which is where most customers (and indeed, most advocates and medical professionals) will naturally look to find the form.

We additionally urge the Commission to make clear that the medical certificate form is not necessary to prevent utility termination.

Medical certificates are one of the most important tools our families have to prevent the devastating impacts of a utility shutoff. We encourage the Commission to make these proposed changes to improve the ease with which our families, and others across Pennsylvania, will be able to obtain medical certificates to preserve their utility service and their health.

Thank you for your consideration,


Rachel Mark, Esq.



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