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February 16, 2021

Rosemary Chiavetta, Secretary
Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission
400 North Street
Harrisburg, PA 17105

Dear Secretary Chiavetta:

As legislators who represent households that are struggling, we urge the Commission to extend the prohibition on utility shutoffs for “protected customers” with income at or below 300% of the federal poverty level. In addition, we strongly encourage the Commission to adopt a plan for the resolution of utility arrears that does not exacerbate the economic devastation and public health crisis facing low-income communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread economic insecurity across the state. We are concerned about our constituents’ access to heat, electricity, and water, especially as people must remain in their homes for their safety.

There is currently a moratorium on utility shutoffs in place, but it will expire on March 31st, 2021 unless the Commission takes additional action. Based on data provided by utilities at this docket, over 847,000 residential customers are at risk of utility shutoff across Pennsylvania.

As such, we are asking the Public Utility Commission to extend the current protections for low-income customers and develop a plan to equitably forgive utility debt. Uninterrupted, affordable utility service is essential to helping families survive and recover from this pandemic.

The Commission should extend the prohibition on utility shutoffs of “protected customers” because utility shutoffs remain a threat to public health and safety.

COVID-19 continues to devastate Pennsylvania communities and requires the continuation of a utility termination moratorium. Public health experts note that, notwithstanding recent efforts to vaccinate the public, this pandemic is far from over. Pennsylvania remains in a state of emergency, and both state and federal officials have continued to direct Pennsylvanians to take a variety of precautions to prevent the transmission of the virus – which continues to evolve in new and unpredictable ways.

A recent study by researchers at Duke University found that utility moratoria nationwide reduced COVID-19 infections by 4.4% and mortality rates by 7.4%. Given the ongoing public health emergency, we urge the Commission to extend the prohibition on utility shutoffs of “protected customers” contained in its October Order.

Without further action from the Commission, low-income utility consumers will likely suffer catastrophic harm when utilities resume utility terminations in the spring. Termination of utility service makes homes unsafe and uninhabitable, and places families and whole communities at risk of physical and financial harm.

The Commission should adopt an equitable plan for the resolution of utility arrears.

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of Pennsylvanians - disproportionately from low income, Black, and Latinx communities - are out of work, or have experienced a substantial reduction in income. At the same time, families continue to stay home to prevent the spread of the deadly virus, causing utility usage and costs to remain abnormally high. As a result, households have struggled to keep up with mounting utility bills.

The solution to these mounting utility bills is not to turn off service – forcing people from their homes. Such a result will only make the current public health crisis worse, disproportionately affecting Black and Latinx neighborhoods and compounding deep economic and racial inequities laid bare throughout the pandemic. We urge the Commission to ensure that all consumers have access to flexible payment options – including comprehensive arrearage management and debt forgiveness programming – to help stabilize struggling families and eliminate the lingering threat of utility termination.

The Commission should not place the full responsibility for repayment of these arrears solely upon the shoulders of residential utility ratepayers. The Commission should adopt an innovative and equitable approach that spreads the responsibility for these arrears across all sectors of our society.

We urge the Commission to extend consumer protections to Pennsylvanians who are most vulnerable.

This Commission has acted boldly to protect Pennsylvanians from harm since the start of the pandemic. We urge the Commission to continue to demonstrate the same dynamic leadership by extending the current prohibition on termination for protected customers and implementing a comprehensive consumer protection plan that includes an equitable strategy for the resolution of utility arrears. This requires the Commission to protect low-income households from the loss of services until the pandemic subsides and utilities have developed an equitable plan to address mounting arrears that will avoid widespread terminations that will hinder Pennsylvania’s broader recovery.

Respectfully,

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