



August 22, 2023

**VIA E-FILE**

Rosemary Chiavetta, Secretary  
PA Public Utility Commission  
P.O. Box 3265  
Harrisburg, PA 17105

**Re: Columbia Gas of Pennsylvania, Inc. Universal Service and Energy Conservation  
Plan for 2024-2028 Submitted in Compliance with 52 Pa. Code § 62.4  
Docket No. M-2023-3039487**

Dear Secretary Chiavetta:

Attached for filing, please find the **Reply Comments of the Coalition for Affordable Utility Services and Energy Efficiency in Pennsylvania (CAUSE-PA)**.

Copies have been served as indicated on the enclosed Certificate of Service.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ria M. Pereira".

Ria M. Pereira, Esq.  
*Counsel for CAUSE-PA*

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**BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION**

Columbia Gas of Pennsylvania, Inc. Universal :  
Service and Energy Conservation Plan for 2024- : Docket No. M-2023-3039487  
2028 Submitted in Compliance with 52 Pa. Code § :  
62.4 :

**CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

I hereby certify that I have, on this day, served copies of the **Reply Comments of the Coalition for Affordable Utility Services and Energy Efficiency in Pennsylvania** in the above captioned matter upon the following persons and in accordance with the requirements of 52 Pa. Code § 1.54.

**SERVICE VIA EMAIL ONLY**

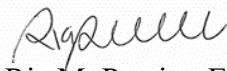
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**BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION**

Columbia Gas of Pennsylvania, Inc. Universal Service :  
and Energy Conservation Plan for 2024-2028 : Docket No. M-2023-3039487  
Submitted in Compliance with 52 Pa. Code § 62.4. :

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**REPLY COMMENTS OF THE COALITION FOR AFFORDABLE UTILITY  
SERVICES AND ENERGY EFFICIENCY IN PENNSYLVANIA**

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August 22, 2023

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Coalition for Affordable Utility Services and Energy Efficiency in Pennsylvania (CAUSE-PA), through its attorneys at the Pennsylvania Utility Law Project, submits the following Reply Comments pursuant to the Public Utility Commission's June 15, 2023 Order Directing Supplemental Information and Establishing Comment Period (hereinafter, June 2023 Order), which invited interested parties to submit comments and reply comments to the proposed Universal Service and Energy Conservation Plan (USECP) for 2024-2028 of Columbia Gas of Pennsylvania, Inc. (Columbia or the Company) (Proposed 2024 USECP or Plan).

On August 7, 2023, CAUSE-PA and the Office of Consumer Advocate (OCA) each submitted initial Comments in response to Columbia's Proposed 2024 USECP and the issues identified in the Commission's June 2023 Order. CAUSE-PA submits the following Reply Comments for the Commission's consideration in response to OCA's initial Comments. For the sake of brevity, CAUSE-PA will not reiterate the extensive arguments raised in our initial Comments but incorporates those arguments by reference. To the extent that any argument raised in OCA's initial Comments is not addressed, this does not indicate CAUSE-PA's agreement with or opposition thereto.

## II. REPLY COMMENTS

### ***A. Columbia's proposal to improve its CAP energy burden standards should be approved without further delay.***

In our initial Comments, CAUSE-PA strongly supported Columbia's proposal to adjust its applicable income tiers and reduce its PIP rate energy burden standards consistent with the Public Utility Code and the Commission's CAP Policy Statement. (CAUSE-PA Comments at 8). As discussed further in our initial Comments, Columbia's proposal to decrease energy burdens

will improve affordability and help to address longstanding rate unaffordability for Columbia's low income CAP customers. (Id.)

In its initial Comments, OCA raised concerns that Columbia failed to provide projections of the cost of CAP bills beyond 2024. (OCA Comments at 7). OCA further questioned why Columbia projects that the percentage of income payment for households with incomes between 51-100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) would increase by approximately \$4 per month under Columbia's proposal, despite the reduction of energy burdens for these households. (Id. at 7-8). OCA recommended that, prior to approval, the Commission require Columbia to explain why its proposed PIP amounts for households with income between 51-100% FPL are projected to increase, despite a reduction in the percentage of income charged to these households. (OCA Comments at 7-8, 10).

In our initial Comments, CAUSE-PA similarly questioned the accuracy of Columbia's projections for households with income between 51-100% FPL. (CAUSE-PA Comments at 7-8). We explained that, pursuant to Columbia's energy burden proposal, households with income between 51-100% FPL will necessarily experience a 1% decrease in their CAP rate. (Id.)

We do not believe further inquiry is necessary to assess Columbia's proposal to reduce its energy burden standards. Upon further review of Columbia's Supplemental Information, we note that Columbia added its current \$10 monthly CAP Plus fee to its projected PIP rates. (Supplemental Information at 2). Columbia adds its CAP Plus fee – which is calculated to recover an amount equal to the total federal LIHEAP dollars received in the prior year – directly to the CAP bill, over and above the household's percentage of income CAP rate. (CAUSE-PA Comments at 10-14). Eliminating Columbia's CAP Plus fee from its projections would result in an average CAP rate of \$71 for households with income between 51-100% FPL – an average \$6

*reduction* from Columbia's current PIP rate for households in this income tier. (Supplemental Information at 2). Both OCA and CAUSE-PA oppose Columbia's continued imposition of a CAP Plus fee, which necessarily increases CAP bills above the Commission's maximum energy burden standards. (CAUSE-PA Comments at 10-14; OCA Comments at 15).

CAUSE-PA reiterates its opposition to Columbia's proposed CAP Plus charge, and opposes further delay in the implementation of Columbia's reduced energy burdens to align with the Commission's standards. Columbia's CAP customers are in immediate need of improved affordability through implementation of reduced energy burdens. Columbia's proposal to reduce energy burdens will improve affordability for CAP participants; address long-standing unaffordability for these customers; more precisely target affordability based on low income household's ability to pay; and help ensure that households with the greatest need are able to reasonably afford to maintain service to their home. (CAUSE-PA Comments at 8). We therefore urge the Commission to approve Columbia's proposal to reduce the energy burden standards for its CAP, without further delay, to ensure that low income customers can realize critical improvements to their monthly CAP bills.

***B. CAUSE-PA recommends establishing a more robust collaborative stakeholder and review process for any subsequent cost containment proposals to ensure such measures do not erode the affordability and accessibility of CAP.***

In its initial Comments, OCA recommended that the Commission require Columbia to monitor the impact of implementation of revised energy burdens on actual CAP program costs and provide parties information if the actual annual total USECP costs exceed the original budget by greater than 20 percent. (OCA Comments at 12). Should total USECP costs exceed budgeted amounts by 20% or more, OCA suggested that Columbia propose forward-looking cost control measures, unless a justification for their omission is provided. (Id.)

CAUSE-PA supports ongoing monitoring and reporting of universal service program data – including program costs – to allow for ongoing programmatic adjustments based on holistic information. However, we are concerned that Columbia has not set forth accurate budget projections necessary to benchmark costs as OCA has proposed, nor has it provided an adequate level of detail necessary to fully assess the drivers of increased costs. In turn, we are concerned that future unspecified cost control measures could jeopardize the affordability achieved through CAP and curtail low income customer engagement in the Program. As OCA recognized in its initial Comments, cost containment measures are not necessarily prudent – even if costs increase. (OCA Comments at 11-12). Depending on the cost control measures imposed, CAP could be rendered ineffective or otherwise inaccessible to Columbia’s low income families, resulting in significant harm. It is vital that the Commission ensure that low income customers are able to access assistance through universal service programs, as required by statute,<sup>1</sup> without impediments to affordability and enrollment.

OCA recommends that Columbia inform stakeholders of a budget exceedance of 20% or more and afford stakeholders the opportunity at a meeting to provide input on the need for and potential design of cost control measures. (OCA Comments at 12). While OCA’s proposal would preserve the rights of parties to support or oppose any proposed cost control measures, it would nevertheless require Columbia to advance a proposal for unspecified cost control measures without requiring integration of stakeholder input and without a clear process for subsequent review. This limited stakeholder process restricts important inquiry and discussion that could reveal the reasons behind potential cost increases and whether cost increases may be attributable to factors outside of changes to USECP programming – such as the recent volatility in gas prices

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<sup>1</sup> 66 Pa. C.S. §§ 2202, 2203(8), (9).

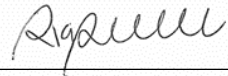
and soaring inflation driving increased need. (CAUSE-PA Comments at 11-12).

If OCA's proposal is approved, CAUSE-PA recommends that the Commission require Columbia to engage in a more robust stakeholder review process designed to more fully assess, identify, and address the potential root causes of budget exceedances without undermining the affordability and accessibility of CAP for all income eligible households. Stakeholders should have the ability to request relevant data and information necessary to fully assess the reasonableness of Columbia's projections as compared to actual costs, and the drivers of those costs. If this collaborative process results in Columbia or another stakeholder petitioning for implementation of future cost containment measure, the Commission should require the petitioning party to explain how the cost control measure will preserve affordability and accessibility. Proposals should be explored through an on the record proceeding, subject to full discovery, to determine whether any proposed measures are just, reasonable, in the public interest, and supported by substantial evidence.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

CAUSE-PA thanks the Commission for its thoughtful consideration of the issues raised above and in CAUSE-PA's initial Comments. We urge the Commission to act in accordance with CAUSE-PA's Comments and Reply Comments to ensure that all customers – regardless of income – are able to access safe, affordable service within Columbia's service territory.

Respectfully Submitted,



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