



April 10th, 2020

Joseph M. Truschelli
Acting Director, Consumer Division
Department of Public Utilities
One South Station, Fifth Floor
Boston, Mass. 02110

RE: Request for Comments Regarding Best Practices During the Resumption of Shutoff Activities

We thank the Massachusetts Division of Public Utilities for expediently requesting a moratorium on utility shut-offs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Continued utility service will help Massachusetts residents remain in their homes and receive emergency communications during this crisis.

Once the emergency moratorium ends, the Division of Public Utilities will need to regain the capacity to shut off service for households and businesses who do not pay their utilities. However, the approach to arrearage payment should not prolong the hardship faced by many of the state's low income, elderly, disabled, and ill households.

In addition, there will be a significant increase in unemployed people, including those who have never accessed government assistance, are not familiar with the low income rate, and do not know about serious illness protections.

Keeping in mind that non-payment due to coronavirus is, by and large, "no fault," we ask the DPU to put in place the following:

- Eliminate late payment fees for households unable to pay electric and gas utility bills during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Forgive debt incurred during the height of the coronavirus pandemic for all households on the low income rate who have lost income or experienced the death of a family member due to coronavirus.
- Forgive debt incurred during the height of the coronavirus pandemic for households that are not currently on the low income rate but who have loss of income that makes them eligible for the low income rate.
- Allow households 12 months to repay arrearages
- For the next 18 months, expand eligibility for shut-off protection to any household with a resident over 60, not just households in which all members are elderly.



In addition, we ask that the DPU institute an aggressive communications, outreach and enrollment strategy, including through CAP agencies and grassroots community-based organizations, and if possible via inserts in utility bills, to let medical professionals and people with serious illness know about protections for people with serious illness, the elderly and infants. Due to the special risks faced by the elderly during this time, we ask that any household with an elder resident, not just those with all elderly residents, be eligible for protection over the next 18 months.

The DPU should require extensive outreach to ensure that all Massachusetts residents understand their utility rights. Provide multilingual communications advising customers of:

- Low income rate for households below income threshold
- Standard protections for illness and age and how to request them
- Fuel Assistance and other emergency utility funds

While we understand that utility companies must cover costs, we believe the rationale for forgiving debt is similar to the rationale for the Arrearage Management Programs. Households who are so far behind that they can never dig out are less likely to pay their current bills than those who know that bill payment is likely to guarantee continued utility service.

Loss of income from coronavirus is, by definition, “no fault.” Yet, after businesses and higher income households recover from COVID effects, low income households could experience long-term financial instability due to debt. For the lowest income people in Massachusetts, including those on fixed budgets and those who are already stretching wages to cover food, rent, and utilities, it simply may not be possible to add an arrearage payment.

Of course, the CARES Act will increase weekly payments to some unemployed workers, including low wage workers. In the short term, that means some people who experience unemployment may actually have an increased ability to pay bills.

But the CARES Act will not reach undocumented workers, people whose hours are cut but not eliminated and those with irregular work schedules. It will not help people who work but have not earned enough hours to qualify for unemployment or those who, due to limited English capacity, lack of phone access, or other obstacles, cannot get through the unemployment application process. Keeping these people on utility service, as long as they pay bills after the worst period of crisis, will benefit all Massachusetts residents.



Keeping in mind that the state may experience additional waves of illness, and that low income people, the elderly, and people with pre-existing illnesses are most at risk, we believe that any effort to minimize harms from the post-moratorium shut-off will not only help individual households but also protect the broader public health. We urge you to act as quickly as possible to institute these sensible further protections.

Sincerely,

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