

Filed VIA ePUC

STATE OF VERMONT
PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION

Docket No. 20-0703-PET

Vermont Organizations declaration in support of)
Vermont Legal Aid Request for Moratorium on)
Utility and Telecommunications Shutoffs During)
State of Emergency)

REQUEST TO REINSTATE THE TEMPORARY MORATORIUM

We, 11 Vermont organizations dedicated to the health and wellbeing of Vermonters, wish to comment in support of Vermont Legal Aid's request, filed December 11th 2020, for the Public Utility Commission (PUC) to reinstate a temporary halt of involuntary utility disconnections (the moratorium) during the state of emergency in Vermont because of the COVID-19 pandemic. No Vermonter should have to worry that their utilities could be disconnected during this pandemic because they are unable to make bill payments.

In March of this year, the PUC issued a moratorium on utility disconnections that went into effect on March 18th. But, after multiple extensions, that moratorium expired on October 15th. Since then, the pandemic has become drastically worse. And on December 15th, the Vermont COVID-19 Arrearage Assistance Program, designed to assist Vermonters facing financial hardship and an inability to pay overdue utility bills, closes to applicants. That, combined with the expiration of federal unemployment benefits the day after Christmas, will put Vermonters who were already struggling under even tighter financial constraints.

We believe it is not worth the risk of even one Vermonter suffering utility disconnections due to a lack of state action during the pandemic.

Although we appreciate the goodwill shown by utilities who have vowed *not* to disconnect customers under these circumstances, the decision of whether or not to allow such disconnections should not remain in the hands of individual utilities, no matter how well-intentioned. The state of Vermont has the power to prevent Vermonters' electricity, heat, and other utilities from being shut off; we strongly urge the PUC to exercise that authority now.

Beyond the fact that housing with disconnected utilities provides inadequate shelter, absent the moratorium, Vermonters could be driven into unsafe situations that may include seeking refuge with friends or family in violation of the statewide ban on multi-household gatherings, which could in turn contribute to a worsening of the pandemic. It is for the reasons listed above and more that we wholeheartedly agree with Vermont Legal Aid's assessment that, "the case could not be clearer" that the moratorium "must be reinstated immediately and continue through the duration of the state of emergency," and urge the Public Utility Commission to make it so.

Dated at Montpelier, Vermont, this 11th day of December, 2020.

VERMONT PUBLIC INTEREST
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