

STATE OF VERMONT
PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION

Case No. 20-0203-INV

Investigation into the establishment of reduced rates for low-income residential ratepayers of Vermont electric utilities	
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Order entered: 04/01/2020

ORDER ESTABLISHING SCHEDULE & NOTICING WORKSHOP

This proceeding concerns an investigation by the Vermont Public Utility Commission (“Commission”), pursuant to Vermont Statutes Annotated Section 218(e), Title 30, into the potential implementation of best practices for providing discounted rates to low-income residential ratepayers of Vermont retail electric utilities.

In today’s Order, I establish a schedule.

I. BACKGROUND

On February 3, 2020, the Commission opened this case to investigate “whether to extend the potential implementation of best practices for providing discounted rates to low-income residential ratepayers of all Vermont retail electric utilities.”¹ Section 218(e) of Title 30, Vermont Statutes Annotated grants the Commission the authority to undertake such an investigation.

At this time, only Green Mountain Power Corporation (“GMP”) operates an electric low-income rate program, called the Energy Assistance Program, which has been operational since 2013.²

On November 15, 2019, GDS Associates, Inc. submitted to the Vermont Department of Public Service a report on the Energy Assistance Program, focusing on recommendations to increase enrollments.³

¹ *Investigation into the establishment of reduced rates for low-income residential ratepayers of Vermont electric utilities*, Case No. 20-0203-INV, Order issued 2/3/20, at 2.

² See Docket 7535 and Case No. 18-0126-PET.

³ See Case No. 18-0126-PET.

II. DISCUSSION

The Commission finds the time ripe to investigate two items associated with reduced rates for low-income ratepayers: (1) the best practices associated with GMP’s Energy Assistance Program and (2) whether it is appropriate for non-GMP electric distribution utilities (the “Utilities”) to develop and implement low-income rate programs of their own.⁴

These two items raise questions concerning how to structure the procedural elements of this case and what issues are relevant for comment and discussion. To begin examining these issues, I ask participants to answer the following questions:

- Should this proceeding be broken into two tracks, one track to consider GMP’s Energy Assistance Program and a second track to deal with the other Utilities that currently do not have a low-income program? (If a two-track process is adopted, I expect that the two tracks would not be isolated from each other but, rather, would inform one another.)
- Should the proceeding consider a state-wide low-income program, or should it consider a service-territory-by-service-territory low-income program?
- Should low-income programs be supported by ratepayer funds, by a state tax, or by other means?
- Should the benchmark for “low income” be 150 percent of the current federal poverty level, or should it be at another level, such as 180 percent or 200 percent?⁵
- Do the Utilities have access to reliable information about how many qualifying low-income consumers reside in their service territory compared to how many non-low-income consumers?

⁴ The Utilities include: Burlington Electric Department, Ludlow Electric Light Department, Swanton Village Electric Department, Vermont Electric Cooperative, Village of Barton Electric Department, Village of Enosburg Falls Electric Department, Village of Hardwick Electric Department, Village of Hyde Park Electric Department, Village of Jacksonville Electric Department, Village of Johnson Electric Department, Village of Lyndonville Electric Department, Village of Morrisville Water & Light Department, Village of Northfield Electric Department, Village of Orleans Electric Department, Village of Stowe Electric Department, and Washington Electric Cooperative.

⁵ For the purposes of 30 V.S.A. § 218(e), “low-income electric utility consumer” means a customer who has a household income at or below 150 percent of the current federal poverty level.

- Do the Utilities have the technological and human resources infrastructure to design and implement a low-income program?
- Can the Utilities present potential low-income programs that could illustrate what a low-income program in their respective territories might look like and what it might cost to operate such a program?

III. ORDER & SCHEDULE

I ask all participants to answer the questions listed above and to file their answers via ePUC by no later than **June 1, 2020**. If participants have additional questions or issues they would like to have raised in this proceeding, then those participants should include those questions in their comments.

Reply comments may be filed by no later than **June 29, 2020**. Included in these replies should be proposed answers to any additional questions or issues that were raised in the earlier-filed comments.

All comments and replies should be filed in Case No. 20-0203-INV, under the “All Other Documents” tab.

Furthermore, a workshop shall be scheduled in this proceeding. However, given the current state of emergency in Vermont due to the coronavirus, that workshop will not be scheduled until a further time.

SO ORDERED.

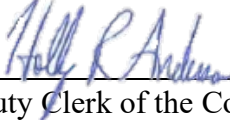
Dated at Montpelier, Vermont, this 1st day of April, 2020.



John C. Gerhard, Esq.
Hearing Officer

OFFICE OF THE CLERK

Filed: April 1, 2020

Attest: 
Deputy Clerk of the Commission

Notice to Readers: This decision is subject to revision of technical errors. Readers are requested to notify the Clerk of the Commission (by e-mail, telephone, or in writing) of any apparent errors, in order that any necessary corrections may be made. (E-mail address: puc.clerk@vermont.gov)

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