



Deborah Kafoury Multnomah County Chair

August 25, 2020

Michael Dougherty
Chief Operating Officer
Public Utility Commission of Oregon
201 High St. SE, Suite 100
Salem, Oregon 97301-3398

Re: COVID-19 Impacts on Utility Customers

Dear Mr. Dougherty,

We appreciate this opportunity to provide feedback as the Oregon Public Utility Commission (OPUC) and its staff consider potential action in response to the impacts of COVID-19 on utility customers. We also thank the OPUC for its swift effort to understand how the pandemic and subsequent economic crisis have impacted utility customers and to consider how it can minimize the human cost of losing access to utility services in the middle of a pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, we have focused on the dual task of responding to a public health emergency while also providing safety-net services to those most in need. We have seen up close how this health and economic crisis has exacerbated existing inequities. Indeed, Black, Indigenous and other People of Color (BIPOC) are more likely to work in public-facing jobs so they are contracting the virus at a higher rate, and, due to unequal access to healthcare and higher rates of chronic disease, they are also more likely to die from COVID-19.¹ Similarly, the economic impact of the pandemic has hit Latinx and Black populations especially hard.² We are concerned that utility disconnections and rising arrears could further exacerbate the disproportionate burden being felt by BIPOC community members and other vulnerable

¹ Multnomah County, *New numbers show COVID-19 damage to communities of color; leaders call for better data collection* (May 1, 2020), <https://multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/new-numbers-show-covid-19-damage-communities-color-leaders-call>.

² Pew Research Center, *Financial and health impacts of COVID-19 vary widely by race and ethnicity* (May 5, 2020) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/05/financial-and-health-impacts-of-covid-19-vary-widely-by-race-and-ethnicity/>.

populations. Indeed, national data indicates that lower income households are at higher risk of disconnections and that Black, Latinx, and senior citizen households, on average, have incomes lower than the median income in the United States.³

The utility data on arrears that the OPUC has made available as part of this process paints a concerning picture. The number of customers in arrears and the magnitude of the debt in June 2020, compared to June 2019, are indicators of the increased economic vulnerability for many in our community.⁴ These data paint a troubling picture regarding the high number of households at risk from the immediate impacts of a utility disconnection, should disconnections resume, as well as the difficult financial situation that our community members face as a result of this crisis.

Losing access to utility services right now would be particularly damaging because of the upcoming winter season and because many in our community are more bound than usual to their homes due to the pandemic. Examples include children learning from home while libraries and schools are closed, and seniors and other vulnerable community members needing to find ways to stay cool or warm at home now that community cooling and warming spaces are unavailable. Even following the simple, yet vital, public health recommendation of washing your hands with soap and warm water is impossible if your utilities have been shut off. These examples highlight the ongoing health crisis behind this economic crisis and how we must protect our community's access to essential utility services.

We appreciate your work on a Staff proposal. Due to the seriousness of current circumstances, we encourage you to advocate for maximum protections to utility customers. We see the proposal submitted by Citizens' Utility Board of Oregon (CUB) as the floor for the type of protection that our community needs to survive this pandemic. In fact, we encourage you to propose, and the OPUC to adopt, either a longer moratorium on disconnections or a commitment to having a process prior to 4/1/2021 to determine whether lifting the moratorium is indeed appropriate. We also appreciate the elements of CUB's document that seek to minimize financial impacts and preserve our vulnerable communities' ability to recover as smoothly as possible. We can and should minimize the likelihood that an unpaid utility bill could lead to evictions, to community members choosing bills over food, and to other serious adverse impacts that are hard to imagine for most professional households, but all too common in low-income communities.⁵

³ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Lights Out in the Cold: Reforming Utility Shut-Off Policies as If Human Rights Matter* at 9-10 (Mar. 2017),

https://naacp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Lights-Out-in-the-Cold_NAACP-ECJP-4.pdf.

⁴ Oregon Public Utility Commission, *COVID-19 Arrears Data*,

<https://www.oregon.gov/puc/utilities/Documents/COVID-Impacts-ArrearsData.pdf>.

⁵ *Lights Out in the Cold* at vii-viii.

Access to energy is essential to health and well-being, particularly for the many community members who face existing health vulnerabilities which make them more susceptible to the impacts of COVID-19. The OPUC should act with the moral clarity that these unprecedented times call for to ensure that vulnerable community members are protected until the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 have passed.

Respectfully submitted this 25th of August, 2020.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Deborah Kafoury". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent than the last.

Deborah Kafoury
Multnomah County Chair