



May 18, 2021

Oregon Public Utility Commission

Attn: Chair Megan Decker, Commissioner Letha Tawney, Commissioner Mark Thompson

Via email: [puc.publiccomments@state.or.us](mailto:puc.publiccomments@state.or.us)

Re: UM 2114, Investigation into the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Utility Customers, May 20 Continued Public Meeting on the Moratorium

We submit these supplemental comments in response to your ideas voiced on May 13. We hope they will be helpful to you in coming to a decision on May 20.

First, we reiterate that we believe comprehensive, low-barrier debt forgiveness and an extended moratorium through Sept 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021 are the best available options. However, we deeply appreciate the Commissioners', utilities', and others' openness to **formalize a process through which to protect the most at-risk customers, if disconnections resume, through utility filings.**

Creating a meaningful and robust system between the agencies and utilities, one that encompasses referrals from the utilities as well as a process to communicate when an at-risk household is in the process of obtaining assistance, will take several weeks. Each agency and utility function differently. Creating a system for each will require time and policy adjustments from the agencies and utilities both. Time to create plus time to test is needed to make sure vulnerable households aren't falling through the cracks. Larger agencies receive hundreds of requests for assistance a day and have many more applications somewhere in the eligibility process. It will require a large amount of administrative work to track and report the requests for assistance. That is time that staff will be away from assisting households and processing payments. A moratorium would allow staff to focus on getting assistance out the door and ensure that no vulnerable households fall through the cracks and face the barrier of reconnection costs.

Agencies are not yet conducting business as usual, as there are still pandemic safety measures in place. Some are back in the office part time, but most are conducting business over the phone, and through mail and email. It will again require time to return to offices, hire and train new staff, and put

any new procedures in place. For the county agencies in particular, the process to hire will take 6-8 weeks once the additional LIHEAP funds are received. At this point, it looks like the LIHEAP funds will arrive in July, which would mean that hiring and training wouldn't be complete until at least September in Clackamas, Multnomah, and Lane counties. As mentioned above, larger agencies receive hundreds of requests for assistance a day, without the threat of disconnection. Once disconnection letters are sent out, that will increase to a point where most households will not be able to get through to agencies. This creates panic for households, as they continue to attempt to get the help they need by calling multiple Community Action phone numbers, other non-profits, legislators, and state agencies. Households sometimes attempt to call the utility at that point, but with decades of prior messaging that the utility will ask for money to stop the disconnection (as is still the case at some utilities), out of fear, many will not. Agencies will deal with floods of calls to other parts of the agency, parts that will also be dealing with increased need for rental and food assistance, as households attempt over and over to get through. Sometimes, phone systems crash at agencies due to the flood of calls. Without more staff to deal with the increased need to respond to calls and emails, even fewer clients will get through, which leads to less applications and payments and more disconnections. Without more staff to deal with the increased need, it will take even longer to process payments, and could take weeks for a household to get through the process. That would make any kind of tracking of households in the process more difficult and time consuming, and would again take more staff to monitor. Agencies at full capacity and funding would be able to minimize the chaos and panic that ending the rent and utility moratoriums are going to cause Oregon.

Agencies are also in the midst of planning for new federal water assistance funds to arrive, as well as rolling out a brand new state system for rental assistance. Again, more time for all of these programs and funds to be rolled out would allow for the hardest hit, most vulnerable households to obtain true wrap around services when accessing assistance. Express enrollment and an increased payment cap for OEAP will be in place by summer. Another LIHEAP and OEAP allocation will be available in October as the program year begins again, ensuring that there is even more funding to help with arrears and upcoming winter bills. Pushing the moratorium date back to September 30<sup>th</sup> would allow for the agencies to be as fully funded, fully staffed, and flexible as possible. There will be more resources at that point to handle the tidal wave of Oregonians who will need utility and rent assistance as these moratoriums are lifted, and they become even more financially burdened than prior to the pandemic.

All of this is complicated by significant uncertainty about unequal vaccination and covid/economic recovery rates. And all of it would be endangered by resuming disconnections too soon, which puts the 'carrot' before the 'stick.' It also risks shutting people off before they are able to access needed money. We hope the Commission takes these details into account as it crafts a specific and careful timeline and process.

We also offer some clarifications regarding points we proposed in our previous comments that were discussed on May 13, in particular in response to the concern that disconnection notices are a needed reminder. We underscore that utilities are currently rolling out sophisticated processes to ensure the most at-risk customers receive funds first. Such processes attempt to ensure that customers who need the money most receive it first, and others later if at all, though there will likely still be considerable need. Utilities should continue to roll out these protections and prioritization, even as we consider more

blanket protections. We should also be mindful that all of us have internalized ‘billing hierarchies.’ While some ratepayers, when faced with a disconnection notice, might be able to afford higher-order concerns like rent, food, and medicine before paying their utility bills, others cannot. Neither of these groups of ratepayers are “free riders,” but only one set is forced to make a dangerous choice. There is convincing evidence that the latter group of ratepayers is overwhelmingly the norm.

In short, we cannot have disconnections begin as soon as August. To minimize burden on all of us and those ratepayers who are unable to defend themselves, we believe an extended and comprehensive moratorium is necessary, including protection through winter. But we are eager to work with all parties to make sure we have a clear timeline and protective measures in place, if you disagree.

Sincerely,



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