

September 1, 2021



Public Utility Commission
Attn: Filing Center

Re: UM 2114

Investigation into the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Utility Customers

Thank you for this opportunity to inform the Oregon Public Utility Commission (Commission) and its Staff as you consider how this process impacts communities living with energy insecurity. As suggested by other stakeholders, I am submitting this written version of the comments that I provided verbally at the August 25, 2021 Special Public Meeting in Docket No. UM 2114.

The energy predicament that low-income Black people live under in Portland is uncomfortable. The overall quality of life isn't much better. How do I know? I am one of them. In the past six months, I have experienced two climate-change related power outages. The first outage was on February 12, 2021, during the ice storm. This outage caused all of my food to spoil and I had to ask a friend to sleep on their couch. The second outage was on June 29, 2021, the hottest day of the heat dome that broke Portland's temperature records. I had to ask the same friend to sleep on their couch.

Based on my income and the cost of the rental market here, I do not have many options for a more sustainable living environment. What was the most critical thing that made both of those experiences unbearable? The loss of electricity. Fortunately, I have remained employed during the pandemic, and I have some resources, along with a great friend. This was not caused by my inability to afford to pay my bill. However, what if I was a 60 year old Black grandmother raising grandchildren by herself on social security and unable to pay her bill in the Lents neighborhood, where the temperature of the air was 124 degrees on June 29, 2021?

We know that these are real situations that some Black people in Multnomah County are experiencing. We have the statistics. We know that there are areas in Multnomah County and around the state that are experiencing urban heat island effects, and that homes in these areas do not cool down overnight. This is the legacy of redlining: frontline communities, dysfunctional infrastructure, and defective systems. This creates what I like to call "Climate Survival Barriers" (please give me credit if you use this term).

When we speak of energy burden and the importance of keeping your power on, we must recognize that there are tremendous socioeconomic, historic, and structural issues that created that energy burden. This is what makes Mr. Ezell Watson such a superb individual to perform the task of the DEI Director and to lead this process that we hope will help us collectively understand and address inequities in energy utility service in Oregon.

One punishment of poverty is the feeling of powerlessness you experience when your power gets cut off, because you did not have the economic power to pay your electric bill. Think of that phrase we use to express energy: power. Since those from Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) communities are not the majority of people involved in Commission decision-making processes, I would venture to say that there is a tremendous lack of experience with the reality and culture of poverty in the BIPOC community and other communities vulnerable to disconnection for non-payment. Not only is Mr. Watson aware of these circumstances, he embraces and empathizes with those experiencing burden, as well as those speaking on their behalf.

Decisions about disconnections, energy access, etc., should formally recognize and account for racial and economic inequities. For example, some members of our BIPOC community are at a higher risk of disconnection. This and other structural realities and inequities often also make BIPOC members of our community more vulnerable to the impacts of disconnection.

Utility service is essential, particularly with the threat of COVID, the need for internet access, the plausibility of wildfires, air quality issues, more severe temperatures, and more. Electricity allows people the freedom to engage in modern life. Electricity can literally impact someone's health, and be the difference between life and death. That importance will continue to grow as we see more impacts of climate change. As a result, this conversation about energy burden and social inequities associated with our energy utility service is timely and crucial.

We at Multnomah County Office of Sustainability strongly appreciate efforts by Ezell Watson and other Staff to set up a workshop process that seeks to fully engage a wide variety of voices and experiences and that serves as a space where we can collectively identify solutions that recognize the essential nature of utility service. After hearing Ezell mention that he had to pay a relative's electric bill to avoid a shutoff, I felt comfortable to share my predicament because I knew he could relate.

Thank you for considering my experience as you think about the importance of the decisions you are making in this process.

Sincerely,

Knowledge Murphy

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