



February 16, 2021

Chair Decker  
Public Utility Commission of Oregon  
201 High St. SE, Suite 100  
Salem, Oregon 97301-3398

Dear Chair Decker,

CAPO is writing to express our concern about the disconnection moratorium expiring on April 1<sup>st</sup>, and to ask the commission to extend the moratorium for the health and safety of vulnerable Oregonians. At this point, the pandemic is worse than when the moratorium was enacted and the economy has not recovered. Low income, BIPOC, and other marginalized communities in Oregon have borne the brunt of the pandemic, both health wise and economically. According to the utility data that has been shared, the zip codes with the highest arrearages have lower income levels and higher populations of non-white residents. Resuming disconnections would disproportionately impact communities of color, communities that have already incurred the highest costs of this pandemic.

PUC staff's concern regarding customers growing arrearages has been repeatedly stated, as well as a concern that customers are not contacting utilities to make payment plans. CAPO believes that by extending the moratorium, it provides time for outreach and messaging to make it to marginalized communities about new programs that are available to help navigate this unprecedented time. It has historically been difficult to access energy assistance, and contacting utilities has previously always meant an expectation to pay towards the account. The current messaging of "match" programs means exactly that to households that are already struggling to pay for increased food costs, rent, and medicine. Allowing time for the change in messaging about decreased barriers and instant grants towards accounts is crucial, not only for households to reach out, but for stakeholders to gather data and make sure these new programs are working as intended and reaching the most marginalized communities. More time would also allow for agencies and utilities to maximize the impact of energy assistance programs and arrearage management plans working together.

This past week, a winter storm left hundreds of thousands of Oregonians without power, showcasing how important electricity is for children to access school, and the overall health and safety of Oregonians. This is quite literally a life and death issue. Studies show that communities with disconnection moratoriums in place have a COVID-19 case rate that is 4.4% lower and a death rate of 7.5% lower than those that do not. Starting disconnections will directly lead to an increase in cases and more deaths. CAPO urges the commission to look towards other options, and not simply resume disconnections as in the past.

Sincerely,

*Janet Merrell*

Janet Merrell  
Executive Director