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Rhode Island Public Utilities Commission
89 Jefferson Boulevard
Warwick, RI 02888

Dear Commissioners,

Every day at the George Wiley Center we hear from dozens of Rhode Islanders whose utilities are shut off or who are facing shut off. People who are shut off after falling behind on unaffordable utility bills are often pushed into snowballing hardship and even greater financial stress. This includes hospitalization, eviction, foreclosure, homelessness, hunger, family separation, loss of children, and frustration at the disrespect and dismissal they are shown by the utility company and others who refuse to offer affordable payment plans. Below are the voices of just a few dozen who know what it's like to struggle to pay high utility bills, people who have faced shut-off and still live with its threat looming over them.

We wish these stories were anomalies in the system, but sadly they are all too common. To understand the extent of the crisis of shut-offs in Rhode Island, take each of the below statements and multiply it by a thousand, since approximately 20,000 households in the state have their utilities terminated each year. This number is shockingly high for our small state. We urge the Rhode Island Public Utilities Commission to hear from the people who are affected by your decisions, to really listen to them as they are the true experts on this issue. Thank you for considering the people of Rhode Island who are struggling to make ends meet, thank you for issuing emergency regulations to allow heat, light, and dignity this winter.

**Utility Consumers' Statements of Support for
Emergency Regulations to Allow Affordable Down-Payments and Utility Restoration:**

"I am 77 years old and I have had my gas and electricity shut off for over 2 months. I can't use my nebulizer when I don't have electricity. I have been unable to take a warm shower in 2 months. It is important to have reasonable payment plans especially for senior citizens who are fragile and in poor health. I take medications for my thyroid condition and I have severe asthma and use a nebulizer. I haven't been able to use my nebulizer so I have had more difficulties breathing. National Grid wants me to pay 25% of my back bill to get turned back on. Unfortunately, I defaulted on the Henry Shelton Forgiveness plan. I can't afford the 25% down payment that National Grid is demanding, and LIHEAP doesn't have enough money to pay that amount either but I could have my utilities restored if my down payment is 10%. I need heat. Please make these emergency rule changes so I can get my utilities turned back on."

--Annabell Alexander, Providence

“My partner of 7 years passed away. All the bills were in his name. I was never on the bill, just a contact. But now I have a \$4000 gas bill. I’m in a bad situation right now. I have to get help with the gas bill. I don’t have a place right now and if I do want to find a place to live, I would have a huge bill to pay in order to get utilities.”

–Joanne Dailey, Westerly

“My brother just got his electricity shut off and they have a 2 year old. The baby is very emotional and doesn’t know where she is going to be next, since the family is having to go from house to house to take showers. Paying 10% could help him and his family get turned back on. I’m back on now, but was turned off before, so I know what it’s like. For me it was very emotional having my electricity shut off and then my gas was going to get shut off, and then I was evicted. I couldn’t afford to pay my utilities and my rent because I got a pay cut. Having my utilities shut off, my son has asthma and he got a cold but couldn’t use his nebulizer because the electricity was off, so I had to take him to the hospital for him to get a nebulizer treatment. Even on a budget payment plan, I can’t keep up on my bills because they are asking for almost \$500 a month for gas and electric, and I only make \$800 a month.”

--Wendy Phillips , Smithfield

“I had to pay \$700 to keep from being shut off. I was making \$1,500 a month, with rent and three kids and daycare, so that was way more than I could afford it. People have young kids, over 24 months, they get shut off, which isn’t right.”

--Kayla Polin, Central Falls

“I live with my elderly Mom in the town of Westerly. We recently lost our electric service despite my pleas to National Grid and the Division for a lower payment. We went 4 months with no light, hot water, refrigerator, or way to cook. In those 4 months my Mom was hospitalized twice, suffered a dislocation of her knee, and I ended up hospitalized as well. My Mom has chronic pancreatitis, type 2 diabetes requiring insulin, and numerous other health ailments. National Grid was asking for 35% down in order to maintain my services. Once disconnected they required 50% to restore it. They were unwilling to work with me even after I offered another amount and a plan that I could afford for the arrears. Myself and my family lived 4 months in the dark and without an effective way to store my mother’s insulin which resulted in her sugars dropping into the 40's and 50's. NO ONE should ever have to live that way and there should be rules in place so that a lower amount is asked of consumers.”

--Megan Wales, Westerly

“My kids are worried, “are we gonna get shut off mom?” This is not right what they’re doing to people”

– Darlene Bently, Woonsocket

“It’s hard out here, the jobs don’t pay enough, the bills are too high. I have a son who is asthmatic and I am myself and they still shut us off, with no protection. When I was shut off they asked for \$900 which was way more than I could afford, but I was able to use the Henry Shelton Plan to pay only \$100 to get turned back on. I think it’s a good idea that everyone be allowed to pay 10% down because they ask too much for the bills.”

Lisa Price-Correira, Providence

“I think the down payment to get turned back on should be lower. We are a family of 5 and my husband is the only one who works, I have to stay home to take care of the kids, so in a one income house it’s tough to come up with the high down payments. Right now we’re on a budget plan for gas and it’s \$500 a month which we’re struggling to be able to pay. The gas company is never willing to help, they just want their money, they say there’s nothing they can do. The PUC should look out for the people of Rhode Island because the gas company doesn’t want to hear anything I have to say, they just want money. It would be horrible to not have heat in the winter, I don’t know how people would do it.”

--Dalmary Rainville, Pawtucket

“When you have a sick child with asthma utilities are important.”

– Skyla Araujo, Providence

“I did get shut off when they knew I had a daughter with special needs, I couldn’t pay the bill and they didn’t want to hear it. I’m trying to sacrifice and make a living and taking care of my daughter with special needs. With all her medical needs, it’s a life-threatening issue, she has epilepsy and pulmonary problems, it’s messed up that they don’t care about her, when she needs electricity to stay alive. Especially when they want a high amount for the bill, pretty much they want their money and that’s it, they don’t care. I lost so many jobs because my kid comes first, so that makes it hard to make a living. When I was shut off they wanted a big chunk and I couldn’t afford it. I had so many medical affidavits, they would say they didn’t have it on file and they didn’t care and that I still had to make the payments. We ended up having to move because we couldn’t afford to keep living where we were. We went from being home owners to having to rent, and now that property we used to own is abandoned and being broken into, which is bad for the whole community.”

--Jennifer, Providence

“What about disabled people, people on life support, breathing machines, electronic chairs to get up the stairs?”

– John Alexa, Woonsocket

“It is important, especially in winter, that people have affordable payment plans to get utilities restored because many people live on fixed incomes and often fall behind on bills and get shut off. Some families have people with asthma who use nebulizers like my 6 year old and myself.”

--Sharon Alamo, Pawtucket

“My electricity was shut off for three days and I had to sell personal belonging to come up with \$1,000 to get my lights back on. They don’t care about me. They don’t care about anybody. I filled out a form and they said I didn’t qualify and that was it.”

–Fatima Dailey, Pawtucket

“When I needed help, there was a long process and I didn’t have the time and I didn’t have support. I had to pay 60% down payment to get my utilities turned back on, which was a hardship for me.”

–Christine Desalvo, North Kingston

“It’s really very hard. They shut off my electric and I had to go to a friend’s house for a few days. Looking for help is hard. I tried to call National Grid; they won’t listen. I have little kids in the house. I can’t work 40 hours a week with 3 little kids. We are living in the cold. We have nothing to cook with. I have to go outside to cook on the grill. It’s really tough. It breaks my heart. They don’t care. 10% would mean a lot.”

-Folasade James, Pawtucket

“They shut off my electricity when I wasn’t home and very late in the day. I couldn’t get in touch with anyone. I have an 8 year old. They wanted \$300 to turn it back on. They wouldn’t help because it wasn’t my main source of heat. But I need electricity for the furnace to turn on.”

-Rosetta Johnson, Westerly

“National Grid is threatening me and my wife to shut us off again after coming up with \$4,000 and I'm making our payment arrangement. They also are saying my medical records are outdated. They were signed and dated July 15,2015. The paying made last month to them are trying to say I made it to an old account which is the same account, I don't understand what’s going on. We are keeping up with our end and they're threatening to disconnect us again. For following the agreement I made with the Division. I'm sick of them not taking my life-threatening medical conditions into consideration. One of us is going to have to die in order to get change.”

--Alan Costa, Portsmouth

“I was shut off in May, both my gas and electric. They just want way too much money for a payment plan. Every time you get shut off, the down payment goes up another 10%. It’s just not manageable. I had to pay 50% down. To only have to pay a 10% down payment would be much more manageable.”

--Carrie Dalton, Westerly

"It's important for people to keep their electricity on especially in the cold weather and for students going to school so they're not literally put in the dark. It is a public utility and we expect everyone to have electricity today for communication and for their health. 10% seems reasonable to pay and then eventually pay off your bill. Shutting people off in the winter is absolutely something that is not positive for anybody including the schools, hospitals, landlords and the families losing their children to DCYF if they don't have any utilities, it is a disaster."

--Betsy Dees, Portsmouth

"I think the request is fair for folks to have their utilities on even if they have defaulted on the Henry Shelton Act. People need to stay warm and have lights and I agree with the George Wiley Center's initiative."

--John prince, Providence

"I was one of the people who completed the Henry Shelton Act but other people couldn't keep up with it and they got shutoff. It would be a great thing to help people not get shutoff, especially people who are sick with cancer or handicapped."

--Wanda Trinidad, Providence

"I wish they would turn me on. They were asking for \$4,500 on an \$11,000 bill and I have \$1500 saved up. I've had financial hardship due to my husband being so young but having a life threatening heart condition. I got laid off from my second job and my son got laid off from his city job. I had the medical protection from the doctors because he has a life threatening situation and still does. Not having the electric on for the past 4 weeks has really affected him. The doctor sent in that he wanted the power on two weeks ago he didn't want my husband without power because the stress alone could cause him to have another heart attack. We can't even cook inside the house and have to cook outside on a grill in the cold."

-Fran Marley, Warwick