

October 9, 2018

Chairperson Margaret Curran
Rhode Island Public Utilities Commission
89 Jefferson Boulevard
Warwick, Rhode Island 02888

Dear Honorable Commissioners:

The George Wiley Center respectfully requests that the Rhode Island Public Utilities Commission institute an emergency regulation to allow affordable restoration of utility service for Rhode Islanders whose gas or electric service has been terminated. In order to safeguard public health as the cold season approaches, we ask that these rules be instated immediately and remain in place through the end of the calendar year.

Specifically, we suggest that residential utility customers be allowed to restore service with 10% down payment of the total owed and an agreement for the remaining balance to be repaid over 18 to 36 months. It is also important to note that previously adopted emergency restoration rules have included barriers to households burdened with extended economic instability. We urge the PUC to eliminate the punitive requirement that consumers' past due amounts are less than last year. Such social policy punishes people who are suffering from long-term unemployment or those whose incomes have decreased due to age, ability or health considerations. Especially as the weather turns colder, it is indeed an emergency when Rhode Islanders lack utility access and are left to struggle without heat, light, refrigeration, food preparation, warm water, communication, electronic medical devices, and all the other basic needs utility service provides. As a group with decades of focus on utility advocacy and organizing, every week the George Wiley Center hears from dozens of households facing the crisis of utility termination. And while we are able to connect people with services, unfortunately there are still too many Rhode Islanders who are currently shut off, which is why this emergency regulation is so important.

We know the positive impact affordable down payments can have in economically struggling households, and conversely we see the negative consequences of unrealistically high down payments that many simply are unable to afford. Furthermore, with higher down payment requirements, limited federal LIHEAP funds are more quickly depleted by customers who need crisis grants, lowering the amount of LIHEAP funds available to other grant recipients.

We appreciate your leadership in recognizing economic and public health circumstances, to implement an emergency regulation for restoration of utility service. We encourage the Commission to act on behalf of our families and neighbors, to enable dignity, health, and survival when utility service is so vitally needed during the harsh conditions of winter. Thank you for your timely consideration of this request, as we continue to work toward longer term solutions to offer affordable utility service for all Rhode Islanders.

Sincerely,

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