



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS

DIVISION OF PUBLIC UTILITIES & CARRIERS

Legal Section
89 Jefferson Boulevard
Warwick, Rhode Island 02888
(401) 941-4500
(401) 941-9207 - Fax

May 21, 2020

Ms. Luly Massaro
Commission Clerk
89 Jefferson Blvd.
Warwick, RI 02888

In Re: Docket No. 5022

Dear Luly,

Through Order No. 23826, issued on May 8, 2020, the Public Utilities Commission (“Commission”) extended its previously ordered moratorium on utility collections activities, including termination of service for nonpayment, until May 31, 2020.¹ The moratorium was initially put in place on March 16, 2020 in response to a declared state of emergency related to the COVID-19 virus.²

Order No. 23826 also directed regulated utilities, by May 15, 2020, to provide the Division of Public Utilities and Carriers (“Division”) with their plans for resuming collection activities after the Commission lifts its emergency moratorium orders. The Commission has indicated that such plans must contain the following five (5) minimum attributes:

1. Utility shutoff should always be the last resort and should not happen for any customer immediately upon the lifting of the moratorium;
2. Sensible and flexible payment arrangements;
3. Outreach activities through which customers are reminded of their overdue balances, made aware of available payment plans, and which encourage customers to communicate with the utility;
4. An explanation of how the utility will address customers that are temporarily unemployed or seriously ill due to COVID-19; and
5. An explanation of how the utility will be ready to meet higher call volumes from customers.

¹ Order No. 23826, p. 3.

² Order No. 23786.

In response to the filing of such plans, the Commission has requested that the Division provide the Commission with a report, by May 22, 2020, that addresses the following five (5) questions:

1. Whether the utility has adequate resources in place to commence full collection activities;
2. Whether the utility has plans in place to provide appropriate and adequate outreach to its customers about the availability of payment arrangements;
3. Whether the utility has plans in place to offer sensible and flexible payment arrangements;
4. Whether the utility has plans in place to manage its own collection practices, with intervention by or support from the Division only as a last resort; and
5. Whether the Division has any other recommendations.

In response to the Commission's directives, each of the Commission's regulated water, gas, electricity and wastewater public utilities has submitted their plans for resuming collection activities with the Division. After a thorough review of each plan, the Division can report to the Commission that the Division believes that each utility has adequately satisfied the criteria established for inclusion in such plans, consistent with the requirements of Order No. 23826 and current individual tariff requirements. The Division was especially pleased to see that some utilities have taken additional helpful measures by temporarily suspending credit card fees and interest and late fees on outstanding balances. The Division recommends that all regulated utilities adopt these measures, as well as offering payment plans to nonresidential customers. The Division also urges all regulated utilities to fully maximize their commitments to customer outreach in order to ensure that all customers are aware of the billing adjustments and payment plans available to them. Finally, the Division also accepts that some utilities plan different collection methodologies for customers with large arrearages that pre-date the advent of the COVID-19 crisis.

As a final comment, the Division stresses that all payment plans offered by the regulated utilities covered by Order No. 23826 must be used to fairly and judiciously manage arrearages with the ultimate goal to effectuate full repayment over a reasonable period of time and not to grow arrearages beyond the ability of customers to meet their financial obligations.

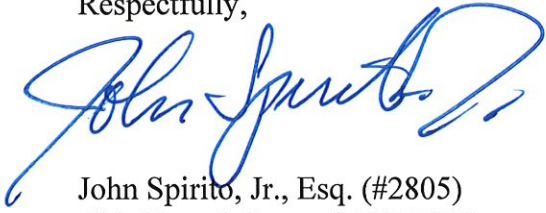
Order No. 23826 additionally sought comments from stakeholders on the question of whether the Commission should further extend its shutoff moratorium beyond May 31, 2020. Such comments are due on May 28, 2020. In this regard, the Commission specifically seeks comments on the following: (1) whether a moratorium on service terminations should continue for all categories of customers (non-residential, standard customers, protected customers); (2) whether there should be a lifting of the moratorium for a category of customer; and (3) the appropriate duration of any extension of a moratorium on service terminations.”³

As in its previous comments in this docket, the Division has no objection to a further extension of the Commission's prohibition on "collections activities... including termination of service for nonpayment" for both residential and nonresidential customers after May 31, 2020 (See Order Nos. 23786, 23807, 23809 and 23826), if determined to be appropriate and necessary by the Commission in view of the continuing COVID-19 crisis and based on the data responses

³ Order No. 23826, p. 6.

proffered by the State's regulated water, gas and electric utility companies. The Division notes that previous data responses universally reflect a reduction in utility collections during the last several months.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Spirito, Jr.", written in a cursive style.

John Spirito, Jr., Esq. (#2805)
Chief Legal Counsel, RIDPUC