

**STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION**

**IN RE: SUSPENSION OF SERVICE TERMINATIONS :
AND CERTAIN COLLECTIONS ACTIVITIES : DOCKET NO. 5022
DURING THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY :**

**ORDER
(EXTENSION OF MARCH 16, 2020 ORDER – NONRESIDENTIAL)**

On March 9, 2020, Governor Gina Raimondo declared a state of emergency in Rhode Island as part of the State’s response to the COVID-19 virus. Subsequently, Governor Raimondo closed restaurants for in-house dining and limited public gatherings to 25 people or more. Several municipalities were also under states of emergency with various limitations on businesses and gatherings.

On March 16, 2020, the PUC ordered all electric, natural gas, water, and sewer utilities to immediately cease certain collections activities, including termination of service for nonpayment, sending past due accounts to collections agencies, and sending termination notices with disconnection dates prior to the end of the stated period.¹ The order was in effect through March 31, 2020 for nonresidential customer accounts, subject to further review.

Since March 16, 2020, Governor Raimondo has issued more Executive Orders, further limiting economic activity in Rhode Island, and has continued the duration of previously issued Executive Orders. In particular, she recently prohibited gatherings of more than five people and ordered the closure of all non-essential retail businesses. Thus, since the PUC’s prior order, even more businesses have been closed. While there are businesses that may be able to operate with

¹ Allowed collections activities included billing, reminder notices, entering payment plans, and other activities not prohibited by this order. Customers have been encouraged to continue to pay their bills to the extent they have the financial ability. Nonpayment results in higher balances that can become even more challenging over time. Utilities have been encouraged to offer flexible payment plans to all customers facing financial hardship, even short-term, during this time.

their employees working from home, the closing of retail establishments will result receiving lower (or no) revenues to many nonresidential customers.

The PUC has reviewed financial information provided by the utilities about the impact of our March 16, 2020 order. While many utilities are experiencing lower collections than during the same time in prior years, they are not yet experiencing difficulties in meeting their own financial obligations as a result of the decline in nonresidential collections. Additionally, many of the utilities have voluntarily ceased termination of service for all customers through April 15, 2020. Therefore, pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § 39-1-32(a), public safety requires the continuation of the March 16, 2020 order, of temporary duration, to protect the welfare of the people through April 15, 2020.² The PUC will review this order on April 13, 2020 to determine if it should be extended or modified as to nonresidential customers.

Accordingly, it is hereby,

(23807) ORDERED:

1. Pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § 39-1-32(a), public safety requires the continuation of the March 16, 2020 order, of temporary duration, to protect the welfare of the people.
2. Effective through April 15, 2020, all electric, natural gas, water, and sewer utilities shall continue the cessation of certain collections activities, as set forth herein, including termination of service for nonpayment.

² R.I. Gen. Laws § 39-1-32(a) states: Any general or public law notwithstanding, the commission, when it determines that public safety so requires, or that failure to act immediately will result in irreparable injury to the public interest, or that an emergency exists in the financial affairs of a public utility which, if not met immediately, will interfere with the accommodations, convenience, and welfare of the people, may issue an order effective immediately, but for temporary duration, until formal notice be given and a hearing had of the parties in interest.

3. The PUC invites public comment to be submitted by April 10, 2020 on whether to extend this order with respect to nonresidential customers beyond April 15, 2020. The utilities should provide the following information by April 10, 2020: (1) Have collections dropped off for residential and nonresidential customers over the past two weeks compared to prior months and prior years? (2) If so, please quantify the extent of the reduction. (3) What effect has any such reduction had on the utility's cash flow? (4) Has the utility been unable to meet any obligations, or does it expect to be unable to meet any financial obligations in the next two weeks if it cannot commence termination of service as a collections option? (5) Provide any information on plans for termination of service for nonpayment through April 30, 2020.
4. Public Comment can be submitted to Luly Massaro, Commission Clerk online at luly.massaro@puc.ri.gov or physically delivered to 89 Jefferson Boulevard, Warwick, Rhode Island 02888.

EFFECTIVE AT WARWICK, RHODE ISLAND, ON MARCH 30, 2020, PURSUANT TO AN OPEN MEETING DECISION ON MARCH 30, 2020. WRITTEN ORDER ISSUED ON MARCH 30, 2020.

PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION



Margaret E. Curran

Margaret E. Curran, Chairperson

*Marion Gold, Commissioner

*Abigail Anthony, Commissioner

*Commissioner Gold and Commissioner Anthony participated in the Open Meeting and concur with this Order but are unavailable for signature due to the requirements that they work from home per Governor Raimondo Executive Order related to COVID-19.

NOTICE OF RIGHT OF APPEAL: Pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws §39-5-1, any person aggrieved by a decision or order of the PUC may, within seven (7) days from the date of the order, petition the Supreme Court for a Writ of Certiorari to review the legality and reasonableness of the decision or order.