

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

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

ORDER ON COMMISSION'S OWN MOTION

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. On Friday, March 13, 2020, she ordered all public schools to be closed for at least one week. This order was extended to childcare facilities on Sunday, March 15, 2020. On Monday, March 16, 2020, the Director of the Rhode Island Department of Health, Nicole Alexander-Scott, M.D., announced that Rhode Island has now experienced "community spread" of the virus which means that it has started to spread without an identifiable source. As a result, Governor Raimondo closed restaurants for in-house dining, and limited public gatherings to 25 people or more. Several municipalities are also under states of emergency with various limitations on business and gatherings. Businesses are being closed in Rhode Island. The result of these measures is that people throughout the state are being affected and out of work as a result of the expectation that Rhode Islanders practice social distancing.

For these reasons, on March 16, 2020, the PUC found that an open meeting held with less than forty-eight business hours' notice was necessary to address an unexpected occurrence that required immediate action to protect the public.¹ The PUC further found that pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § 39-1-32(a), public safety requires an immediate order, of temporary duration, to protect the welfare of the people.² Effective on March 16, 2020, all electric, natural gas, water, and sewer

¹ The notice of open meeting was published to the Rhode Island Secretary of State's website on March 14, 2020 at 1:14 p.m. A copy of the notice was provided electronically to the utilities and low income advocates for written comment.

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

utilities shall immediately cease certain collections activities, as set forth below, including termination of service for nonpayment. This order shall be in effect through March 31, 2020 for non-residential customer accounts and through April 15, 2020 for residential accounts, subject to further review.

Collections activities under this order include termination of service, sending past due accounts to collections agencies, and sending termination notices with disconnection dates prior to the end of the stated period. Allowed collections activities include billing, reminder notices, entering into payment plans, and other activities not prohibited by this order. Customers are 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 are encouraged to offer flexible payment plans to all customers facing financial hardship, even short-term, during this time. In addition, there are likely to be customers who do not currently qualify for National Grid's electric or gas discount rate for income-eligible customers who, because of short-term unemployment, could experience a reduction in their annual income this year such that it will bring them within the income guidelines. National Grid customer service representatives should ensure they are screening customers for this when customers call into the call center.

Customers enrolled in the Arrearage Management Plan offered by National Grid and Pascoag Utility District are currently disenrolled if they miss more than two payments in a twelve-month period under R.I. Gen. Laws § 39-2-1(d)(2)(ix)(A). Any customer currently enrolled in an arrearage management plan who misses their third payment in their applicable twelve-month

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.

period through April 15, 2020 will not be disenrolled unless they miss another payment, subsequently, in the same twelve-month period.

On March 30, 2020, the PUC will revisit this order with respect to non-residential customers. At that time, the PUC will decide whether to extend this order. The PUC invites public comment on this matter to be submitted on or before March 26, 2020. The utilities should provide the following information on or before March 26, 2020: (1) Whether collections have dropped off for 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.

On April 13, 2020, the PUC will revisit this order with respect to residential customers to determine whether to extend the winter moratorium for protected customers and/or whether to extend this emergency order for all residential customers. The PUC invites public comment on this matter to be submitted on or before April 7, 2020.

Because of the existence of the current unusual emergency circumstances, the PUC, effective today, orders National Grid to reinstate the temporary service restoration plans previously approved in Order No. 23697, but without two of the restrictions on enrollment.

Accordingly, it is hereby,

(23786) ORDERED:

1. An open meeting, held with less than forty-eight business hours' notice, was necessary to address an unexpected occurrence that required immediate action to protect the public.

2. Pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § 39-1-32(a), public safety requires an immediate order, of temporary duration, to protect the welfare of the people
3. Effective on March 16, 2020, all electric, natural gas, water, and sewer utilities shall immediately cease certain collections activities, as set forth herein, including termination of service for nonpayment.
4. From March 16, 2020 through April 15, 2020, any residential customer whose utility service has been terminated by National Grid for non-payment or who has a Termination date scheduled will be entitled to have such service restored by National Grid upon satisfaction of certain conditions:
 - (a) for a customer owing less than \$1000, 10% of the balance owed must be paid and the remainder of that balance must be paid within 18 months;
 - (b) for a customer owing at least \$1000 but less than \$2500, 10% of the balance owed must be paid and the remainder of that balance must be paid within 24 months;
 - (c) for a customer owing \$2500 or more, 10% of the balance owed must be paid and the remainder of that balance must be paid within 36 months unless the Company chooses to extend such time period;

In addition to the down payments specified above, customers must pay current bills within the time period allowed by National Grid. A formal commitment to receive funds from any social service agency by April 15, 2020 for all or part of the additional down payment shall be considered compliance with the provisions of the Rules, provided that the customer has satisfied the other conditions set forth above.

5. A customer enrolled in an arrearage management plan who misses their third payment in their current twelve-month period through April 15, 2020 will not be disenrolled unless they miss another payment in the same twelve-month period.
6. This order shall be in effect through March 31, 2020 for non-residential customer accounts and through April 15, 2020 for residential accounts, subject to further review.
7. The PUC invites public comment on whether to extend this order with respect to non-residential customers beyond March 31, 2020 to be submitted by March 26, 2020. The utilities should provide the following information by March 26, 2020:
 - (1) Have collections dropped off for 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.
8. The PUC invites public comment on whether to extend the winter moratorium to protected customers and/or to extend this order with respect to residential customers beyond April 15, 2020 to be submitted by April 7, 2020.
9. Public Comment can be submitted to Luly Massaro, Commission Clerk at luly.massaro@puc.ri.gov or delivered to 89 Jefferson Blvd., Warwick, RI 02888.

EFFECTIVE AT WARWICK, RHODE ISLAND, ON MARCH 16, 202 PURSUANT TO
AN OPEN MEETING DECISION ON MARCH 16, 2020. WRITTEN ORDER ISSUED ON
MARCH 17, 2020.

PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION



Margaret Curran
Margaret E. Curran, Chairperson

Marion Gold, Commissioner

Abigail Anthony
Abigail Anthony, Commissioner

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.