

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 20, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader, U.S. Senate
U.S. Capitol, S-230
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader, U.S. Senate
U.S. Capitol, S-221
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader McConnell and Leader Schumer,

In the midst of the public health and economic emergency caused by the COVID-19 crisis, we urge you to protect the most vulnerable Americans from the dangers and insecurity that result from utility shut-offs. As closures and quarantines disrupt and eliminate income for many American families, low-wealth communities and communities of color are particularly at risk of being disconnected by utilities due to lack of payment. As part of a third COVID-19 package, Congress must protect at risk Americans by instituting a nationwide moratorium on all electricity, water, telecommunications, broadband and other utility-shut offs and providing financial assistance for low-wealth households. A moratorium would provide temporary relief during this COVID-19 crisis, but more needs to be done to address the systemic issues driving these injustices across America.

The continuation of utility services is critical in this COVID-19 emergency. Low-wealth communities and communities of color, including black and Indigenous peoples, are being disproportionately harmed by this emergency. Low-wage jobs are at greatest risk of being reduced or lost during this crisis. Our most vulnerable elderly populations need electricity to run life-saving medical equipment, keep medications refrigerated, and keep their homes at liveable temperatures. As many Americans are working from, or quarantined in, their homes, it is essential that utility services continue uninterrupted. This is the only way to ensure people have access to clean water for handwashing and disinfecting surfaces to slow the outbreak. Access to electricity ensures that families can turn the lights on, have refrigerated food to eat, and continue a basic standard of living. Continuity of broadband access is necessary to ensure employees who can work from home continue to do so and that children that are out of school can access educational resources online. Allowing people to be productive in their homes will facilitate the necessary social distancing required to mitigate the dire impacts of this pandemic.

It is admirable that some utilities have taken voluntary steps to prevent utility disconnections during this crisis and some states have taken orders. However, we need to recognize and reinforce these steps by requiring all utilities to provide robust protections to their customers and provide utilities support so they can do so. Both homeowners and businesses should be protected from utility disconnections. All utilities including electric, gas, water, telecommunications, and Internet Service Providers should be subject to the moratorium on shut-offs. In addition to preventing shut-offs, utility companies should be required to suspend late fees and all fees associated with reconnections indefinitely. Given the uncertainty in the length of the COVID-19

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pandemic, we should keep these policies in place at least until the pandemic threat has passed and the country's economy has stabilized.

The COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted the systemic problem of energy insecurity in the United States and its impacts on low-wealth communities. As Congress enacts legislation to speed the economic recovery of our country, we need policies to permanently increase economic security for black, Indigenous and other People of Color. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has called for the establishment of a universal right to uninterrupted energy service. The NAACP advocates for policies to prevent utility disconnection due to non-payment, including an end to power shut-offs during extreme temperatures, and for programs to help customers pay their bills and improve energy efficiency in their homes.¹ These circumstances are particularly exacerbated in light of the climate emergency and increased climate-induced weather events, including extreme heat waves and flooding, which necessitate the uninterrupted access to electricity and other utilities.

Legislation must also build infrastructure to support distributed renewable energy and provide incentives to expand broadband access in rural areas. Distributed energy systems decrease community dependence on dirty fossil fuels and provide resilient power during extreme climate related weather events. Now is the time for our country to take bold action to protect communities most at risk by promoting energy democracy for all communities.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

¹ https://www.naacp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Lights-Out-in-the-Cold_NAACP-ECJP-4.pdf

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