

Congress of the United States  
Washington, DC 20510

April 15, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker  
United States House of Representatives  
U.S. Capitol, H-232  
Washington, DC 20515

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

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Minority Leader  
United States House of Representatives  
U.S. Capitol, H-204  
Washington, DC 20515

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

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McConnell, Leader McCarthy and Leader Schumer,

We write to request that Congress protects the most vulnerable Americans from the danger and insecurity that results from utility shut-offs by putting a nationwide moratorium on essential utility service disconnections until the COVID-19 pandemic threat has passed and the country's economy has stabilized as part of the next COVID-19 package. A moratorium would provide important temporary relief during this COVID-19 crisis, but as we seek to recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to invest in addressing the systemic issues driving unjust utility burdens across America.

While the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act included important paycheck and eviction protection measures, it failed to ensure that families will continue to have access to the basic utility services—including electricity, water and wastewater, heating, telecommunications, and internet—essential to survive during this health crisis.

Utility services are especially critical for public health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Water service ensures that Americans can handwash and disinfect surfaces necessary to slow and stop the coronavirus outbreak. Electricity is necessary for families to turn on the lights and have refrigerated food to eat. Internet access is essential for many employees to be able to work from home and for children who are out of school to access educational resources. Millions working service jobs on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic are facing disconnection.

Utility insecurity is felt by low-wealth Americans, rural and tribal communities and people of color. Newly unemployed Americans are facing disconnection because of loss of income. Vulnerable elderly populations need electricity to run life-saving medical equipment, keep medications refrigerated, and keep their homes at livable temperatures. These are the communities that need congressional protections the most.

We applaud the many utilities and that have taken voluntary steps to prevent disconnections during this crisis. Many states have also issued orders to keep utility services connected.

For all of us to get through this together we need to have a national policy with clear standards that utilities can follow, and ensure that no family is left behind in the patchwork of policies. The federal government should provide utilities with support for operations as well as customers, especially in light of declining utility revenues caused by unemployment, small business shutdowns, and rising poverty.

Congress cannot simply give low-wealth Americans a short-term reprieve on disconnections without ensuring them adequate time to recover from job losses and other coronavirus impacts. Families should not be condemned to a growing and unpayable utility burden that comes due at the end of this national emergency. We must ensure that these essential services are maintained when the COVID-19 pandemic threat has passed and the country's economy has stabilized.

We ask that the nationwide moratorium last for at least six months beyond the end date of the national state of emergency to allow for a sufficient grace period for families to recover from unemployment and other coronavirus-related impacts. All families whose services have already been cut off should be safely reconnected. All late fees and bill payments for low-wealth families should be forgiven through the end of the grace period. Congress must provide federal support to make this possible.

The COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted the systemic problems of poverty and utility insecurity in the United States and its disparate impact on low-wealth communities and communities of color. When Congress enacts legislation to speed the economic recovery of our country, it should prioritize permanently increasing the economic security for low-wealth individuals. Priority should go to building infrastructure to support distributed renewable energy, safe water systems, and broadband access in rural areas.

Now is the time for our country to provide relief for the communities that are being most harmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to working with you to find a workable solution for all families in this difficult time.

Sincerely,

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Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator

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Peter DeFazio  
Member of Congress

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Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

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Brenda L. Lawrence  
Member of Congress

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Sheldon Whitehouse  
United States Senator

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Ro Khanna  
Member of Congress

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Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator

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Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress

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Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator

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Sheila Jackson Lee  
Member of Congress

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Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator

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Eleanor Holmes Norton  
Member of Congress

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Patty Murray  
United States Senator

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David N. Cicilline  
Member of Congress

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Kamala D. Harris  
United States Senator

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Albio Sires  
Member of Congress

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Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator

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Nanette Diaz Barragán  
Member of Congress

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Ron Wyden  
United States Senator

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Yvette D. Clarke  
Member of Congress

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Kirsten Gillibrand  
United States Senator

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Gwen Moore  
Member of Congress

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Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator

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James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress

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Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator

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Mike Doyle  
Member of Congress

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Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator

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Bobby L. Rush  
Member of Congress

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Amy Klobuchar  
United States Senator

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Jerry McNerney  
Member of Congress

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Jahana Hayes  
Member of Congress

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Jerrold Nadler  
Member of Congress

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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
Member of Congress

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Donna E. Shalala  
Member of Congress

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Pramila Jayapal  
Member of Congress

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Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress

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Veronica Escobar  
Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

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Marcia L. Fudge  
Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

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Ann Kirkpatrick  
Member of Congress

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Adriano Espaillat  
Member of Congress

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Anna G. Eshoo  
Member of Congress

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Tulsi Gabbard  
Member of Congress

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Juan Vargas  
Member of Congress

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Suzanne Bonamici  
Member of Congress

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Ruben Gallego  
Member of Congress

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Bonnie Watson Coleman  
Member of Congress

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Mike Quigley  
Member of Congress

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Jamie Raskin  
Member of Congress

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Rashida Tlaib  
Member of Congress

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Earl Blumenauer  
Member of Congress

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Steve Cohen  
Member of Congress

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Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.  
Member of Congress

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Grace F. Napolitano  
Member of Congress

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Joseph P. Kennedy III  
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Alan Lowenthal  
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Harley Rouda  
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Wm. Lacy Clay  
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Member of Congress

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Julia Brownley  
Member of Congress

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Ilhan Omar  
Member of Congress

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Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.  
Member of Congress

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Ayanna Pressley  
Member of Congress

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Stephen E. Lynch  
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Jennifer Wexton  
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Marcy Kaptur  
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Judy Chu  
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Katherine M. Clark  
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A. Donald McEachin  
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Rosa L. DeLauro  
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Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress

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Elissa Slotkin  
Member of Congress

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Ted Deutch  
Member of Congress