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For Immediate Release

Maryland PSC Prohibits Utility Shut-Offs through November 15, 2020

Payment plans and energy assistance programs can help residential customers avoid service terminations

(BALTIMORE, MD-August 31, 2020) – The Maryland Public Service Commission, in an emergency action, has prohibited residential utility service terminations through November 15, 2020. Governor Larry Hogan’s Executive Order prohibiting service terminations and late fees is set to expire on Tuesday, September 1, 2020. The Commission, which today concluded hearings to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on customers and utility finances, took this step to protect as many customers as possible from having electric, gas or water service shut off and to provide a transition period that allows residential customers time to apply for assistance programs or make payment arrangements with their utility.

“The Commission’s goal is help those customers struggling with household expenses during this difficult time and to ensure that their utility services remain connected,” said Jason M. Stanek, Chairman of the Maryland PSC. “It is important that customers behind on their utility bills not wait for a turn-off notice or, when they receive one, to contact their utility right away and work with them to discuss payment plans and bill assistance programs that are available to help them. The Commission is holding utilities responsible for proactive outreach to their customers to let them know about utility, state and community resources that are available to assist customers who are unable to pay their bills due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and to keep customers in service if they enter into a payment arrangement.”

Under today’s ruling:

- Utilities may not begin sending termination notices until October 1, 2020—45 days in advance of a termination (current regulations require only a 14-day notice).
- Residential customers in arrears would have 45 days from receipt of a notice to work out a payment plan with their utility or to apply for energy assistance programs. **Customers who take either action would not have service disconnected.**
- Utilities must offer a minimum payment plan of 12 months (or 24 months for those customers receiving energy assistance from the state’s Office of Home Energy Programs).
- Utilities cannot require a down payment or deposit as a condition of beginning a payment plan for any residential customer, including both current and new customers.

The Commission reminds utility customers facing service termination that programs are available to assist with bill payment and those who are facing termination have certain rights. Customers behind on their bills and who are facing a shutoff should first contact their utility to

ask about extended payments plans, budget billing or other measures to avoid service termination.

Information on energy assistance programs can be found online at the following sites:

- Maryland PSC website (<https://www.psc.state.md.us/wp-content/uploads/Need-Help-with-Paying-your-Bill-or-Have-a-Termination-Notice-1-2-19-revisions.pdf>)
- Office of Home Energy Programs in the Maryland Department of Human Services (<https://dhs.maryland.gov/office-of-home-energy-programs/>) or call 1 (800) 332-6347
- Fuel Fund of Maryland (<https://fuelfundmaryland.org>) or call (410) 235-9080
- Maryland 211 (<https://211md.org/211provider-utility-assistance>), call 2-1-1 or text My211MD to 898-211
- Maryland Office of People's Counsel (<http://www.opc.maryland.gov/Consumer-Corner>)

The Commission plans to issue a subsequent order in the near future that will include more details on the requirements of the modified termination process and addressing such issues as incremental costs related to COVID-19, etc.

Statements from Commissioners:

"The decision rendered today by the Commission is a first step in balancing the needs of many and varied stakeholders as we try to place ourselves on a sustainable path to emerge from this crisis in a measured and prudent manner and with a cooperative spirit," said Commissioner Anthony J. O'Donnell. "Our first priority is, and should be, to protect the public interests of Marylanders. I anticipate much more refined details to emerge from the Commission regarding these matters in the days and weeks ahead."

Noting that the expiration of the Governor's Executive Order impacts some services not regulated by the Commission, Commissioner Obi Linton said, "I encourage those utility-related companies, such as Xfinity and Verizon, and our state water and sewer agencies to consider announcing and establishing similar transition plans for their customers if they have not done so already." Commissioner Linton currently serves as the Vice Chair for the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC) Consumers and the Public Interest Committee and serves on the NARUC Task Force on Emergency Preparedness, Recovery and Resiliency.

"The measures adopted today provide customers with greater protections in the form of added time to contact their utility for assistance and certainty around extended payment terms," said Commissioner Mindy L. Herman. "We urge anyone having trouble paying their bill to contact their utility and energy assistance agencies to take advantage of these measures, as well as the assistance that is available through state and federal programs."

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About the Public Service Commission:

The Maryland Public Service Commission regulates electric and gas utilities and suppliers, telephone companies (land lines), certain water and sewer companies, passenger motor vehicle carriers for hire (sedans, limousines, buses, Uber, Lyft), taxicab companies (in Baltimore City and County, Charles County, Cumberland and Hagerstown) and bay pilot rates.

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