

# COVID-19 Utility Customer Support Program Guidance

All utilities have a general obligation to provide safe, reliable, and affordable essential services to their customers. On April 20<sup>th</sup>, Governor Inslee announced [Washington's Recovery Plan](#), which includes ensuring access to essential services during the state's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. On May 1, Governor Inslee announced the "[Safe Start](#)" approach for Washington state to begin reopening some businesses safely and continue essential businesses. On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, Governor Inslee issued Proclamation 20-23.6, extending, and amending Proclamation 20-23, pertaining to Utility Ratepayer Assistance and Preservation of Essential Services through August 1st, 2020. Proclamation 20-23.6 extended prohibitions on utilities disconnecting service, refusing to reconnect service, and charging late fees.

This document provides a framework for ensuring that customers experiencing economic hardship as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic maintain access to essential services after Proclamation 20-23.6 expires; by adopting consumer protections, customer support programs, and notification protocols, and participating in public information requests. This guidance applies to residential energy, water, and landline telephone services.

This guidance does not relieve customers from the obligation to pay for utility services.

## General Guidance for all Utilities

Beginning immediately, utilities covered by the guidance should review existing policies concerning disconnection of service, reconnection of service, payment arrangements, and suspension of other fees or charges, and update those policies as appropriate and necessary to assist vulnerable individuals and households to maintain essential services during the economic recovery.

The public should have access to reliable and accurate information about assistance that may be available from their utilities and their local community to help them recover from the economic impacts of COVID-19. Utilities are trusted sources of information and assistance; their communications with customers are essential to this effort. Customers who are having trouble paying their bill should first contact their utility. Utilities should proactively reach out to customers with accounts in arrears to encourage customers to enter into payment arrangements.

### COVID-19 Consumer Protections:

Many utilities have existing consumer protection policies in place, and have adopted additional protections to keep customers connected to essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to assist vulnerable individuals and households with maintaining access to essential services during the economic recovery, energy utilities should consider, at a minimum, the following consumer protections:

1. Prohibit disconnections for low-income and vulnerable households through a date certain;

2. Waive fees associated with late payments, disconnection, and reconnection of service; and
3. Establish protections for customers under any pre-paid meter plans to ensure continued provision of essential services.

**COVID-19 Customer Support Program Principles:**

Each utility providing residential energy, water, or telecommunications services will offer COVID-19 Customer Support programs. These programs may include existing services provided to customers experiencing economic hardship and/or additional programs created for the purpose of supporting those directly affected by COVID-19.

The COVID-19 customer support programs should follow these principles:

1. All programs must be reviewed subject to a public process, or approval by the governing body of the utility, consistent with the utility's standard practice, and prominently posted on a public website, if available. Utilities should also notify customers of their COVID-19 Customer Support Programs in a bill insert, mailing, or other appropriate method of communication.
2. Utility programs should encourage customers with arrearages to contact the utility to help coordinate assistance programs and make efforts to contact these customers directly by phone, email, door tags or premise visits, if necessary. Contact information should be provided on all customer bills and notifications.
3. Utility programs should be designed to ensure that customers maintain access to essential services during the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Utilities should take active steps to review current customer assistance programs, and modify them, as appropriate, to address the needs of all customers.
5. Utilities should offer long-term payment arrangements for those directly affected by COVID-19 to allow customers to recover successfully from the unexpected economic impacts of the pandemic. Six to eighteen months, or longer may be appropriate, considering each customer's unique circumstances.
6. Utilities should work with state and local agencies to help identify customers experiencing economic hardship as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and help those customers gain access to bill assistance.

Additional customer support efforts and outreach are encouraged and are not limited based on these set of recommendations. The UTC, for utilities under its jurisdiction, and local governing boards of consumer owned utilities are encouraged to adopt policies and procedures focused on the unique needs of their consumers.

## Guidance for Energy Utilities

The following guidance applies to energy utilities providing electric or natural gas service, including municipal utilities and public utility districts authorized under Title 35 RCW and Title 54 RCW; cooperatives formed under Chapter 23.86 RCW; and electrical and natural gas, companies regulated by the Utilities and Transportation Commission under Title 80 RCW.

### Energy Utility COVID-19 Customer Notification and Public Information Guidance:

The following guidance is meant to ensure that the information provided to utility customers and the public is timely and accurate:

1. Utilities should develop outreach and communications plans to provide information to customers about options for bill payment assistance and payment plans. This may include communications via website, bill inserts, and direct telephone and email communications initiated by the utility and/or customer. Where needed, information should be provided in languages other than English.
2. The Utilities and Transportation Commission will serve as the single point of contact within state government for customers seeking energy bill assistance information: Utilities and Transportation Commission Consumer Hotline: 1-888-333-WUTC (9882) or [consumer@utc.wa.gov](mailto:consumer@utc.wa.gov). The Utilities and Transportation Commission will develop and implement a communications plan, and provide materials to all utilities for use in their own communications materials.
3. All COVID-19 Energy Utility Customer Support Programs should be posted on the [Department of Commerce's Electric and Natural Gas Rate Payer Assistance Resource](#). If a utility does not have a website, a copy of the customer support programs or the information to direct customers shall be provided.

### Energy Utility Information Requests:

Each energy utility should respond to the Department of Commerce's Utility Economic Impact and Infrastructure Needs Survey, and any subsequent updates. Subsequent updates may include information on customer assistance programs, as requested by the Department of Commerce.

Each utility should provide requested information to the Department of Commerce for consumer-owned utilities, and the Utilities and Transportation Commission for electric and natural gas companies to help the state assess the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on utilities and their customers. This information can be provided in response to the Department of Commerce's Electric and Natural Gas Sector Economic Impact Survey, or regular reporting updates, as determined by the Department and the Commission. Information requests may include:

- Retail load, by customer class
- Number of arrearages, by customer class, over each specified time-period: 30 day, 60 day, 90+ day arrears

- Total amount of past due receivable, by customer class, over each specified time-period: 30 day, 60 day, 90+ day arrears
- Number of customers eligible for disconnection
- Number of disconnections, by customer class
- Number of reconnections after disconnection, by customer class
- Average duration of disconnection, by customer class
- Number and duration of completed deferred payment plans,
- Number of premises enrolled in a bill assistance program
- Number of customers in the 30, 60, and 90 day who have received bill payment assistance in the last 12 months, and last 24 months
- Expenditures for the following programs:
  - COVID related-emergency assistance funds
  - Low-income bill assistance
  - Low-income or other rate discount programs

### **Guidance for Water Utilities**

The following guidance applies to community water systems, including municipal utilities, public utility districts, and water and sewer districts authorized under Title 35 RCW, Title 54 RCW, and Title 57 RCW; water companies regulated by the Utilities and Transportation Commission under Title 80 RCW; and mutual corporations or associations formed under Chapter 24.06 RCW.

#### **Water Utility COVID-19 Customer Support Programs:**

Community water systems have a multitude of customer assistance programs already established, many smaller systems may have more informal programs that help their neighbors. And others may still need to create or update their program. Currently the most readily available option for water utilities is to offer payment plans that allow the utility and the customer to reach an agreement on a reduced payment amount.

Because of the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis, community water systems with more than 1,000 customers should establish at a minimum Customer Assistance programs that ensure customers impacted by experiencing hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic maintain access to essential services after Proclamation 20-23 expires. Options to consider for a customer assistance plan include, but are not limited to:

1. Bill arrearage forgiveness; or
2. Payment plan where shut offs do not occur if the customer consistently pays an agreed to amount of their arrearages accrued monthly; or
3. Provide a combination of the above.

## **Water Utility COVID-19 Customer Notification Guidance:**

The public should have access to reliable and accurate information about assistance that may be available from their utilities and their local community to help them recover from the economic impacts of COVID-19. Utilities are trusted sources of information and assistance; their communications with customers are essential to this effort.

1. Water systems should inform customers about their customer assistance programs and how to receive assistance. Customers with accounts in arrears should be contacted directly. All customers should be notified of available assistance programs by one of the following methods:
  - Notify all customers that a customer assistance program is available and provide a direct URL for the customer assistance program web page (if one exists) either by mail or email.
  - Direct email providing a copy of customer assistance options.
  - Electronic or hard copy customer bills and notifications.
  - Hard copy special announcement delivered through the U.S. Mail.
4. The Department of Health will serve as the single point of contact within state government for information sharing, guidance, and technical assistance for community water systems and their customers. The Department will:
  - a. review sample policies, and customer assistance programs, and develop templates, and best practices;
  - b. Create and post guidance and frequently asked questions documents for water utility customers; and
  - c. Continue to provide email updates to community water systems during the COVID crisis.

To contact the Department of Health for technical assistance or concerns on customer assistance programs:

Phone: (360) 236-3100

## **Water Utility Information Requests:**

Each community water system should respond to the Department of Health's Utility Economic Impact and Infrastructure Needs Survey, and any subsequent updates. Subsequent updates may include information on customer assistance programs, as requested by the Department of Health.

## **Guidance for Telecommunications Companies**

The following guidance applies to telecommunications companies and services regulated by the Utilities and Transportation Commission under Title 80 RCW.

## **Telecommunications Company COVID-19 Customer Notification and Public Information Guidance:**

The public should have access to reliable and accurate information about assistance that may be available from their utilities and their local community to help them recover from the economic impacts of COVID-19. Utilities are trusted sources of information and assistance; their communications with customers are essential to this effort. For all telecommunications companies with more than 1,000 customers:

1. Telecommunications companies should develop outreach and communications plans to provide information to customers about options for bill payment assistance and payment plans. This may include communications via website, bill inserts, and direct telephone and email communications initiated by the utility and/or customer. Where needed, information should be provided in languages other than English.
2. The Utilities and Transportation Commission will serve as the single point of contact within state government for customers seeking energy bill assistance information: Utilities and Transportation Commission Consumer Hotline: 1-888-333-WUTC (9882) or [consumer@utc.wa.gov](mailto:consumer@utc.wa.gov).
3. All COVID-19 Utility Customer Support Programs should be posted on a publically accessible website.

## **Telecommunications Company Information Requests:**

The Utilities and Transportation Commission has authority to request information from telecommunications companies pertinent to implementation of this guidance.

## **Questions?**

General questions about how to comply with the guidance can be submitted to the state's Business Response Center at: <https://coronavirus.wa.gov/how-you-can-help/covid-19-business-and-worker-inquiries>

All other violations related to Proclamation 20-25 can be submitted at <https://bit.ly/covid-compliance>