

# Citizens Utility Board: Asks utilities to delay shutoffs, urges customers to seek energy, rental aid

Posted on Friday, Jul 17, 2020

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

The Citizens Utility Board, Wisconsin's utility consumer advocate, is calling for utilities to be flexible with customers, waive penalties for nonpayment and delay disconnecting customers who are behind on their bills until the fall.

Wisconsin citizens were spared disconnection of their utility services because of the executive orders issued by Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers and decisions by the Public Service Commission.

Those orders were vacated by the state Supreme Court, and the PSC recently decided to allow disconnections to proceed. As of July 15, utilities can now send disconnection notices to customers and may begin disconnecting customers on July 25.

"What's most important at this time is flexibility and an appreciation that the economic conditions in Wisconsin have changed drastically as a result of the pandemic," said Tom Content, CUB Executive Director. "Moreover, the recent upticks in the incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic means this is the wrong time to be shutting off folks' power and water."

In light of a recent surge in cases both in Wisconsin and in many states across the country, CUB is urging utilities to delay disconnections of customers hard hit by the pandemic until the fall. Wisconsin experienced a record 964 new COVID-19 cases on Tuesday, and four out of five counties in the state are experiencing "high" coronavirus activity, according to the state Department of Health Services.

A key challenge is that the disconnection notices issued by utilities are what prompt people to apply for energy assistance and crisis assistance funding made available through the Wisconsin Home Energy Assistance Program. WHEAP has \$8 million in supplemental energy assistance funding through the federal CARES Act.

CUB is urging utilities to consider the economic and health circumstances of customers who may be at risk of shutoff and asks that utilities:

- Waive late payment penalties and reduce down payments for customers who are looking to set up payment plans.
- If the utility decides to pursue disconnections for nonpayment, increase financial thresholds that decide which customers get shut off, in light of the unique circumstances facing Wisconsin citizens with high unemployment and the looming expiration of supplemental unemployment benefits.
- Delay shutting off customers, for now, and do so only after the hot summer months have passed, beginning Oct. 1, at which point the need for continued relief could be re-evaluated.

“We really want folks to be aware that there is aid available to help utility customers who are having a tough time,” said Content. “Folks in need should take advantage of energy assistance and rental assistance funding that’s now accessible across the state.”

Wisconsin has launched a \$25 million rental assistance program, and local rental assistance programs have been announced in Dane and Milwaukee counties, and are being implemented in Racine, Waukesha and other communities across the state. Find out more about these programs at [cubwi.org/covid19](https://cubwi.org/covid19).

CUB has been actively looking for opportunities to address the impact of the pandemic and the economic fallout that’s resulted. That’s why CUB supported a move by the PSC to limit the amount of interest that utilities can collect on costs linked to the pandemic that may be added to customers’ bills in future years.

“We’d also really like to see more energy assistance funding in Wisconsin, something that’s under consideration now by Congress as it considers a new round of legislation to respond to the pandemic,” Content said. “One version of the legislation pending would, for the first time, make emergency aid available to water utility customers.”

CUB is a member of two groups, the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates in Washington, D.C., and the Customers First Coalition based in Madison, that have joined utilities in asking Congress to allocate more than \$4 billion in increased funding for energy assistance.

The more funds that go to energy assistance, the lower the ultimate cost on customers' bills later, Content said.