

Citizens Utility Board: Wisconsin regulators cite surge in COVID-19 cases, delay shutoffs of utility customers

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Disconnections of utility customers in Wisconsin won't start this weekend after the Public Service Commission voted to delay shutoffs until Sept. 1, citing worsening COVID-19 statistics in Wisconsin.

The PSC voted 2-1 to require utilities to hold off on disconnecting customers who are behind on their bills, citing changed circumstances since the Commission's last meeting on this more than a month ago.

"The Commission is clearly trying to strike a balance here, and clearly there will be costs that come due at some point, but record case numbers in Wisconsin compelled the Commission to act for public health and safety reasons," said Tom Content of the Citizens Utility Board.

"The commissioners made the right call, given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic. They clearly didn't want to risk allowing shutoffs to commence which could lead to lives lost due to utility disconnections," Content said.

CUB last week urged utilities to be flexible with customers who are behind on their bills and asked utilities to hold off on disconnecting any customers until October.

The Commission at its weekly meeting Thursday received information from PSC staff indicating that 71,000 households were at risk of shutoff. The Commission agreed to revisit the issue at a meeting planned for Aug. 20.

“Clearly there are a lot of folks who are hurting, and this is the time to be connecting them with available resources,” said Content.

Wisconsin has \$8 million of energy assistance for low income customers available through the Federal Cares Act. The state, along with Dane and Milwaukee counties, have \$45 million in rental assistance funding designed to stave off evictions.

Congress is expected to vote in the coming weeks on a pandemic response bill, and utilities and consumer advocates alike have called for it to include billions more nationwide for energy assistance. A version of the bill passed by the House of Representatives included expanded funding for energy assistance, rental assistance and also created a fund to support water utility customers hard hit by the economic fallout from the pandemic.

Information about resources for utility customers is available at cubwi.org/covid19.