

Rebecca Cameron Valcq: Keeping Wisconsin connected in the midst of separation

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Since Governor Tony Evers declared the first public health emergency back in March to manage the spread of COVID-19, we all have had to adjust our lifestyles; including how we work, learn, socialize, and manage our day-to-day priorities. As we continue to grapple with the devastating impacts of COVID-19 in our state and nation, we must also acknowledge that this remains a critical time to keep people connected in an effort to keep them safe.

To try and stem the tide of positive COVID-19 cases, we are all being instructed by public health officials to stay home when possible; wear masks if we must venture out; limit our social interactions; and maintain proper hygiene with frequent hand washing. It is critically important that we continue to follow the guidelines and recommendations set by public health experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services.

At the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSC), one of our missions to ensure that utility customers in our state can receive the essential utility services they need in a safe, reliable, and affordable manner. This is even more important at a time when so many families are struggling due to the pandemic and access to those services are critical to maintain public health. The continued availability of and access to electric, gas, and water service in the home is essential for enabling residential customers to practice good personal hygiene and social distancing by remaining at home to the fullest extent possible. To that effect, earlier this year, the PSC voted to put in place a moratorium on utility disconnections.

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Since then, I have continued to view the need of essential utility services through a lens of public health, extending the moratorium several times and voting to allow it to stay in place until the spring.

I know that with this action, there may be a temptation for some to abuse the situation. I want to be very clear about the following: the purpose of the current moratorium on disconnections is not to give a free pass to customers or enable them to wait until the last minute to pay their bills. The moratorium's purpose is to make sure that people have access to essential services in order to do their part to stop the spread of the disease. Utility bills will not go away and will have to be paid. I strongly urge all customers who may be behind on their bills to contact their utilities and arrange payment plans or to seek public energy assistance while funding is available. Do not wait until the spring of 2021 to pay your utility bills.

The PSC has been working with Wisconsin Energy Assistance Program staff to ensure energy assistance and crisis funding is available. Recently, Governor Evers announced that an additional \$15 million in Energy Assistance Program funds would be made available from the state's federal CARES Act allocation to qualifying households to help manage energy costs and, in the case of crisis funds, decrease customers' arrears. The Governor directed an additional \$1 million to the Keep Wisconsin Warm/Cool Fund, including for customers whose incomes are slightly above the Energy Assistance income guidelines.

As a Wisconsin utility customer myself, I am proud to see so many of our state's utilities already providing flexibility for us and our families in the midst of this uncertain global pandemic. For many of our state providers, payment plans and non-disconnection guidelines were already in place. This is a testament to the strong partnerships our utilities have with their customers, and the Governor and I are grateful for that.

Defeating COVID-19 in our state is a group effort. Thank you to those who continue to do your part by following public health guidelines. We are all in this together, and we will get through this pandemic together. As Wisconsinites, we know a thing or two about resilience. For information on what the PSC is doing during this pandemic, visit our website at psc.wi.gov.

-Valcq is chair of the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin.