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June 5, 2020

Honorable Mark C. Christie
Chairman
State Corporation Commission
1300 E. Main Street
Richmond, VA 23219

Re: *Commonwealth of Virginia, ex rel. State Corporation Commission, Ex Parte: Temporary Suspension of Tariff Requirements*
Case No. PUR-2020-00048

Dear Commissioner Christie:

Please accept the following comments regarding an extension of the Commission's order imposing a moratorium on utility service disconnections. We applaud and thank you for the original March 16, 2020 order (and subsequent extension on April 9) suspending utility disconnections and late payment fees through June 15, 2020. That order has and continues to serve its intended purpose of protecting the health of Virginia's residents by ensuring uninterrupted access to electricity, heating fuels and water services for utility customers over the past twelve weeks.

While the number of COVID-19 tests administered have increased and the percentage of those tests registering as positive have fallen over the past two weeks, neither the public health crisis, nor the associated economic crisis are over. The Center for Disease Control reports that Virginia has experienced more than 7,500 confirmed cases in the past seven days (ending June 3rd), which is the fifth-highest among all states and represents one-sixth of all cases since the crisis began.[1] Further, more than 400,000 residents remained unemployed during the week of May 23rd.[2]

Additionally, the current crisis is only exacerbating problems households already faced with affording their utility bills. According to the Virginia Department of Social Services (DSS), over 900,000 households in Virginia—more than one out of every four households—have incomes less than 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and nearly 450,000 qualify for state energy assistance

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[1] US Center for Disease Control. United States COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State. Accessed June 4, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/COVID-data-tracker/

[2] Virginia Employment Commission. Unemployment Insurance (UI) Claims Data for Virginia. Week of May 23rd. UI Claims Dashboard. Accessed June 2, 2020. https://www.vec.virginia.gov/ui-claims-dashboard

programs (130 percent FPL or lower).[3] Unfortunately, as detailed in our response to Question 2 posed by the Commission, energy assistance program funding is insufficient for meeting existing needs as it only benefits 23 percent of eligible households.[4]

Further, according to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), the average energy burden for those households, defined as the percent of gross household income spent on energy costs (not including transportation) is 12 percent.[5] By comparison, the widely accepted threshold for what constitutes an affordable energy burden is 6 percent,[6] and the DOE reports that more than 750,000 households in the Commonwealth exceeded that threshold even before the pandemic began.[7]

In other words, a significant number of households in the Commonwealth were already extremely vulnerable to having their utilities disconnected before the public health and concomitant economic crises began. The COVID-19 crisis has only exacerbated that problem, and until public health concerns abate and unemployment falls to a reasonable level, ending the moratorium will have negative consequences for families and individuals struggling to afford their utility bills.

Accordingly, as detailed in our comments below, Appalachian Voices strongly encourages the Commission to extend the moratorium on utility service disconnections, late payment fees and related charges. Just this week, Dominion Energy requested that the Commission approve a four-month extension of the utility's own moratorium (which we strongly support).[8]

We also ask that the Commission require utilities to offer a minimum of 12 months for customers to repay any arrearages incurred both prior to and during the moratorium period. Further, we request that the Commission institute additional consumer protections that are necessary to prevent further economic harm to utility customers. Finally, we request that the Commission require utilities to report, on at least a monthly basis, data on avoided disconnections, the number of customers in arrears, and the total arrears owed, among other items (detailed in our supplemental response comments at the end of the document). This data is necessary for both the Commission and the public to understand and respond to the scale of impacts to both utilities and their customers.

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[3] Virginia Department of Social Services. Report on Effectiveness of Low-Income Energy Assistance (FY2019). October 1, 2019. https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2019/RD433/PDF

[4] *Id.*

[5] U.S. Department of Energy. Low-Income Energy Affordability Data Tool. Accessed June 2, 2020. https://www.energy.gov/eere/slsc/maps/lead-tool

[6] Fisher, Sheehan and Colton. Home Energy Affordability Gap: Definitions. http://www.homeenergyaffordabilitygap.com/01_whatIsHEAG2.html

[7] U.S. Department of Energy. Low-Income Energy Affordability Data Tool. Accessed June 2, 2020. https://www.energy.gov/eere/slsc/maps/lead-tool

[8] Dominion Energy. Dominion Energy Boosts Support for Customers Struggling Financially During Pandemic. June 1, 2020. https://news.dominionenergy.com/2020-06-01-Dominion-Energy-Boosts-Support-for-Customers-Struggling-Financially-During-Pandemic

The following are our responses to each of the questions posed by the Commission in its request for public comment. We have added supplemental comments following these responses.

Question 1: Should the mandatory moratorium on utility service disconnections currently in place be extended beyond June 15, 2020? If so, for how long?

Yes. Given the ongoing economic crisis and the need to continue protecting public health by ensuring household access to vital utility services, we request that the moratorium on utility disconnections and late fees be ***extended for at least another 120 days***. Not only should the moratorium be extended, it should be expanded to require utilities to provide***, at a minimum, a 12-month repayment plan for customers who are in arrears.*** This will alleviate the additional burden customers will face by having to not only pay their regular utility bill, but also an additional debt repayment charge to cover accumulated bill debt. Additionally, the extended order should put in place new requirements and provisions as noted in our supplemental response comments.

It may be useful for the Commission to consider that on May 30, 2020, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper extended his state's own moratorium on disconnections and late payment fees an additional 60 days.[9] That moratorium was set to expire on May 30 and now runs through July 29. Governor Cooper's decision was based on utility-reported data (required per his original order) showing that more than 500,000 households were in arrears on electric, gas and/or water bills at the end of April, with more than 425,000 households having been protected from disconnection for nonpayment during the month.[10]

Given that Virginia and North Carolina have a similar number of total households and low-income energy burdens,[11] it is likely that a similar number of Virginia utility customers would face the loss of utility services should the Commission decide to end the moratorium. Such an outcome will have significant negative health and economic impacts for those households and communities.

Additionally, for as long as the economic crisis continues, the scale of the problem in Virginia may continue to grow. The National Consumer Law Center (NCLC) estimates that between 686,315 and 1,372,630 electricity customers in Virginia could owe past balances as a result of the crisis.[12] NCLC

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[9] North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper. Executive Order 142. May 20, 2020. https://files.nc.gov/governor/documents/files/EO142-Temp-Prohibitions-on-Evictions-and-Extending-Prohibition-on-Utility-Shut-Offs.pdf

[10] NC Utilities Commission First Monthly Report to the Governor Regarding Executive Order 124 (April, 2020). http://starw1.ncuc.net/NCUC/ViewFile.aspx?Id=d7620957-67f8-415d-841f-a16803e81566

[11] U.S. Department of Energy. Low-Income Energy Affordability Data Tool. Accessed June 2, 2020. https://www.energy.gov/eere/slsc/maps/lead-tool

[12] National Consumer Law Center. "Skyrocketing Utility Arrears during the COVID-19 Crisis: The Need for Substantial Federal Support." April 2020. https://www.nclc.org/images/pdf/special_projects/COVID-19/IB_Electric_Service_Arrearage_Narrative.pdf (The NCLC begins with a business-as-usual assumption that 10 percent of customers typically have difficulty paying their utility bills on time. The organization then produced these estimates by assuming 20 - 40 percent of customers will be unable to pay their utility bills on time during the COVID-19 crisis.).

further estimates that total arrears for customers who are 60 and 90 days past due on their bills could range from $184.9 million to $554.7 million.

A second analysis, produced by Vote Solar, which is based primarily on unemployment trends as an indicator of customer inability to afford utility bills, estimates that Virginia could have 516,020 total households (15% of the total) unable to afford their utility bills over the first four months (starting with April), with *total* utility bill arrears (including electric, water, gas, and broadband) reaching $538 million.[13]

Even if the number of households at risk of having their utilities disconnected for nonpayment were to stabilize at current levels, an extension of the moratorium is required to protect those customers from losing their utility services until they are once again able to afford their bills. If the economic crisis worsens, it is clear that a greater number of households will be at risk in the coming months should the moratorium be allowed to expire.

Additionally, in its request for comments, the Commission "notes that, according to information collected by the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners [NARUC], numerous states and other jurisdictions nationwide have not placed mandatory prohibitions on utility service disconnections, but have followed various forms of voluntary measures to avoid or reduce service cutoffs. Some states have allowed initial mandatory moratoria to expire or convert to voluntary measures."[14] However, the Commission fails to note that NARUC publicly expressed support for state moratoria on utility disconnections in March.[15]

Finally, the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates (composed primarily of state Attorneys General), in a May 2020 resolution, resolved that "every effort must be made ***to ensure that universal access to and affordability of utility services are not diminished during this public health and economic crisis***. Utilities, regulators and consumer advocates should work together to craft evidence-based solutions that address the unique challenges and burdens faced by all consumers and other stakeholders during this crisis. Such solutions should ensure the continued safe and adequate provision of utility services at affordable rates and under terms and conditions that are reasonable within this new environment."[16] Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring is a signatory to that resolution.

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[13] Vote Solar. "COVID-19 and the Utility Bill Debt Crisis." April 2020. https://votesolar.org/files/5415/8827/1108/Vote_Solar_COVID19_Debt_Crisis.pdf

[14] Commonwealth of Virginia, State Corporation Commission, Order Seeking Comment on Suspension of Service Disconnections, No. PUR-2020-00048, n5 (May 26, 2020), *available at* https://www.scc.virginia.gov/getattachment/5070ebbf-11f1-48d2-951d-fb81a73720c9/nr200048.PDF.

[15] NARUC statement on COVID-19. March 18, 2020. https://www.naruc.org/about-naruc/press-releases/naruc-statement-on-COVID19/

[16] National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates. Resolution 2020-01. "NASUCA Recommendations Concerning the Effects of the Public Health and Economic Crises Resulting from COVID-19 upon Utility Rates and Services Provided to Consumers by Public Utilities." May 12, 2020. https://www.citizensutilityboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020-01-NASUCA-COVID-19-Policy-Resolution-Final-5-12-20_.pdf (emphasis added).

Question 2: If the commenter advocates extending the mandatory moratorium on service disconnections indefinitely or for a significant period beyond June 15, please identify the programs and mechanisms, public or private, that will provide sufficient funding to ensure that costs of unpaid utility bills are defrayed and will not result in even higher costs on other utility customers.

First, this question is predicated on the assumption that utility bill debt will not be paid. Appalachian Voices disagrees with this assumption, and we implore the Commission not to accept misleading statements from Virginia's electric cooperatives that customers will treat the suspension of disconnections as a "[utility] bill holiday."[17] This is largely incorrect. In this matter, it is incumbent upon the Commission to rely on a default assumption that, by and large, customers who are not paying their utility bills are doing so ***due to a genuine inability to pay—not because customers are taking advantage of the moratorium.***

Extending the moratorium does not, in itself, lead to higher costs on other utility customers. Utility bill debts will still be owed, but they will be paid back over a longer period of time (especially if an extended repayment period is required per our recommendations). This means utilities will eventually be made whole in the ensuing months, especially if new provisions are enacted as recommended in our supplemental response comments.

This is a fundamental to our understanding. The economic crisis has resulted in substantial job losses and therefore loss of household income, exacerbating the underlying vulnerabilities many households already faced in being able to afford their utility bills. The economic crisis is the reason utilities are experiencing revenue losses, not the moratorium itself as suggested by some utilities. ***Lifting the moratorium will not change or improve utility customers' ability to afford their bills or the utility's ability to recover revenues from customers. It will only put vulnerable customers at risk of losing vital utility services.***

Appalachian Voices recognizes that while the Commonwealth's investor-owned utilities are well-suited to absorb short-term revenue losses associated with customer nonpayment of utility bills—as demonstrated by Dominion Energy's request for a four-month extension of the utility's own suspension of disconnections—smaller utilities such as electric cooperatives and municipally-owned utilities may be facing a more dire financial impact (resulting from the economic crisis, not the moratorium on service disconnections).

Other avenues must be pursued to address the short-term revenue shortfall smaller utilities are facing. For their part, electric cooperatives now have access to $5 billion in forgivable loans through the Paycheck Protection Program administered through the U.S. Small Business Administration to help

[17] Petition of Virginia, Maryland and Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives in Response to the Virginia State Corporation Commission's Order to Suspend Utility Service Disconnections during State of Emergency. Case No. PUR-2020-00049. March 17, 2020. https://scc.virginia.gov/docketsearch/DOCS/4lwb01!.PDF

maintain financial stability during the ongoing crisis.[18,19] While this funding opportunity will expire at the end of June, it can and should be accessed immediately by any electric cooperative that is facing an immediate or foreseeable financial crisis due to customer nonpayment.

Additionally, all electric and gas utilities operating in the state should be doing everything they can to facilitate the disbursement of LIHEAP and other sources of bill payment assistance to customers who have been unable to pay their utility bills. Doing so will help reduce the revenue losses utilities are experiencing.

However, it is important to note that existing LIHEAP funds are insufficient for meeting the scale of the problem. Moreover, LIHEAP funds will be exhausted quickly, and they may not be applied to water bills. Virginia received $95.4 million in LIHEAP funding for FY2020[20] (before the relief package), which was enough to provide emergency heating and cooling bill payment assistance to more than 140,000 eligible households.[21,22] Virginia also received supplemental CARES Act LIHEAP funding amounting to $23.6 million[23], which could provide bill payment assistance to another 30,000 to 40,000 households. However, even with LIHEAP funding, the Virginia Department of Social Services (DSS) reports that all sources of low-income energy assistance funding combined will cover less than a quarter of all eligible households.

In other words, while LIHEAP can help pay off all or a portion of existing utility bill debts for a substantial number of electric and gas customers, that source of funding will soon run out (if it has not already) and only has a short-term impact. Therefore, LIHEAP alone is not a sustainable solution, nor does it help customers struggling to afford their water bills.

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[18] U.S. Small Business Administration. Business Loan Program Temporary Changes: Paycheck Protection Program-Eligibility of Certain Electric Cooperatives. May 19, 2020. https://beta.regulations.gov/document/SBA-2020-0029-0001

[19] E&E News. Electric co-ops cleared for federal emergency assistance. May 18, 2020. https://www.eenews.net/energywire/2020/05/18/stories/1063164423

[20] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). FY 2020 Release to States and Territories of LIHEAP Block Grant Funds. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ocs/comm_liheap_3rdreleasedclstateterrtable_fy2020_040320.pdf

[21] Virginia Department of Social Services. Report on Effectiveness of Low-Income Energy Assistance (FY2019). October 1, 2019. https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2019/RD433/PDF

[22] DSS reports a total of more than 212,000 households served by all low-income energy assistance program offerings. However, not all of those programs provide bill payment assistance. The report provides detailed numbers of households served for each sub-program. Those tables were used to generate the value we report here for the number of households receiving direct bill payment assistance.

[23] US DHHS. FY 2020 Release to States and Territories of LIHEAP Supplemental Funds under the CARES Act. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ocs/comm_liheap_supplreleasedclstatesterrs_fy2020.pdf

In North Carolina more than 300,000 households struggled to pay their water bills by the end of April.[24] A different source of funding is needed that can be applied to all household utility bill debt and is appropriate for addressing the scale of the problem.

One potential source of funding to cover revenue shortfalls for smaller electric cooperatives and municipal utilities is Virginia's approximately $3.1 billion allocation from federal CARES Act. It was reported on May 24, 2020 that half of that funding will be redistributed directly to local governments with less than 500,000 residents, with the first allocation amounting to a total of $644 million.[25] Overall, those municipalities will receive as much as $1.55 billion in relief funding. These governments should consider allocating the necessary portion of CARES Act funding to short-term relief for their municipal utilities. Additionally, local governments may be able to use CARES Act funding to provide direct bill payment assistance to all utility customers with accumulated debt, making those payments directly to the utilities (municipal utilities must provide documentation that the customer debts have been paid in order to receive those payments).

To further assist all utilities, and their customers, the Commission should consider that the Virginia General Assembly is empowered to allocate an appropriate portion of the remaining half of its CARES Act funding to provide utility bill payment assistance. Legislators in North Carolina have introduced a bipartisan bill that would allocate $20 million in funding for low-income utility bill assistance.[26] Very low-income households (50 percent of Area Median Income (AMI) or lower) would be eligible for $300 per month for six months, while those falling between 51 and 80 percent AMI could receive up to six months of assistance at a maximum of $150 per month. While that level of funding is not sufficient for meeting the scale of need (as evidenced by the number of households the state's utilities reported being in arrears at the end of April), it provides a good example of how the state could help both customers pay their bills and help utilities recover unpaid debts while a moratorium is in place.

The Virginia General Assembly could and should consider similar legislation, but at a much higher level of funding. Such actions would help address the Commission's concerns about defraying any costs to utilities and their customers arising from unpaid bills during the moratorium.

Finally, to address the implied assumption that the cost of some customers' unpaid utility bills will be socialized to other customers: this assumption is likely false. It inherently assumes that unpaid bills will remain unpaid indefinitely, forcing utilities to recover those losses by increasing costs for all customers. Yet the moratorium does not constitute a waiver of a household's unpaid utility bills. Those bills will

[24] North Carolina Utilities Commission. First Monthly Report to the Governor Regarding Executive Order 124 (April, 2020). May 15, 2020. https://starw1.ncuc.net/NCUC/ViewFile.aspx?Id=d7620957-67f8-415d-841f-a16803e81566

[25] Albiges, Marie. $644 million in federal coronavirus aid is headed to Virginia cities and counties. Here's who gets what. The Virginian-Pilot. May 24, 2020. https://www.pilotonline.com/government/virginia/vp-nw-coronavirus-localities-cares-act-funding-20200524-dgsbo7nrqrcf5lj62a4ceyxyeq-story.html

[26] North Carolina House Bill 1200. Introduced May 26, 2020. https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewBillDocument/2019/7613/0/DRH10823-MQa-162

have to be paid after the moratorium is lifted, ideally over an extended repayment period pursuant to a deferred payment agreement with the utility. This is why we are recommending that the Commission, in addition to extending the moratorium, require utilities to offer an extended repayment period of 12 months following the end of the moratorium. Doing so will enhance customers' ability to repay that debt while keeping up with their current utility bills. In the end, while achieving full debt recovery may take a number of months, it is likely that any unpaid debts will be minimized. This is especially true given the funding sources and opportunities noted above, which can be tailored toward households most in need of utility bill payment assistance. By pursuing policies that minimize total unpaid debts, the Commission also mitigates any potential for socialization of costs at a later date.

Question 3: Should the mandatory moratorium on service disconnections be replaced on June 15 (or some specific later date) with voluntary measures by utilities to reduce or avoid service disconnections, such as offering extended payment plans with no late fees and/or waivers of reconnection charges?

To reiterate our position, the moratorium on disconnections and late payment fees should be extended at least 120 days. The Commission should also require utilities to provide, at a minimum, a 12-month repayment plan for customers who are in arrears. This will alleviate the additional burden customers would face by having to pay their current utility bill in addition to a debt repayment charge to cover accumulated bill debt.

In addition to extending the moratorium on utility service disconnections, the Commission should consider an order requiring utilities to implement the provisions detailed in our supplementary comments below.

SUPPLEMENTARY COMMENTS

Comment 1: In addition to extending the moratorium on utility disconnections and late payment fees, the Commission should institute new provisions aimed at alleviating the burden of debt repayment for households, expanding consumer protections and understanding the scale of the problem relating to utility bill arrearages.

The mandatory moratorium on disconnections and late payment fees should be extended at least 120 days. In addition to extending the moratorium, the Commission should also order the following:

1. Require utilities to offer a minimum of 12 months for customers to pay off accumulated arrears incurred prior to and during the moratorium. This provision should apply to all customers in arrears at the time the moratorium expires.

2. Place additional restrictions on disconnections and fees imposed for customer violations of repayment agreements, including:

a. During the term of a repayment agreement pursuant to the provisions of the order, prohibit utilities from disconnecting customers or imposing late fees, interest and other charges for late/nonpayment if a customer misses a payment. Any missed payments under the payment plan should be amortized over the remaining term of the repayment period;

b. Prohibit any customer deposit requirements;

c. Prohibit down payment requirements on deferred payment arrangements;

d. Prohibit a minimum balance requirement for prepaid utility service customers;

e. Prohibit the use of liens (including lien sales and enforcement of liens) as a collection practice; and,

f. Prohibit reporting of unpaid bills to any consumer reporting agency and the sale of unpaid receivables to private collection agencies.

3. Require utilities to provide emergency water to households for which water service has yet to be restored.

4. Require the immediate reconnection of anyone still without essential utility services that had been disconnected prior to enactment of the moratorium.

5. Require all utilities to submit monthly reports on the number of customers that would have been disconnected due to nonpayment of their utility bills, but for the disconnection moratorium; the amount of late fees waived (or imposed); total utility bill debt owed by customers; the number of customers in arrears; the number of customers that were disconnected for nonpayment prior to when the moratorium first took effect; and steps undertaken to reconnect customers.

6. Implement standardized requirements for utilities to notify their customers of the provisions of the order.

Comment 2: Response to concerns of the Virginia, Maryland and Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives

In their initial response to Virginia's utility disconnection moratorium, the Virginia, Maryland and Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives ("VMDAEC") stated that the reach of the moratorium would lead to "unintended consequences on ... [co-op] member owners".[27] Yet, it is critical to note that significant financial hardships to many co-op member-owners have already resulted from economic disruptions caused by the pandemic. At this time, the Commission should not prioritize concern over how the current crisis will affect electric rates of co-op members in the future. Those concerns can be addressed at a later date, particularly given that co-ops will eventually recover the debts incurred by their members after the moratorium is lifted.

In this same petition, VMDAEC stated that a "free-rider" problem could emerge and expressed concern that business and residential accounts would take advantage of the moratorium to participate in a "bill holiday." VMDAEC provides little basis for this assertion. The petition cites only three reports from two unnamed cooperatives whose members inquired about "free power".[28] Moreover, neither a moratorium nor an extended repayment agreement would allow for free-ridership. All customers in arrears will still be required to pay their debts at the end of the moratorium or repayment period—or face losing their utility service. VMDAEC's membership is comprised of fifteen cooperatives that serve hundreds of thousands of customers across three states. Highlighting three reports in order to assert the existence of a pervasive "free rider" problem grossly misrepresents the prevailing attitude of co-op member-owners towards their electric bills.

Co-op member-owners, along with hundreds of thousands of other electric, gas and water utility customers throughout the Commonwealth need help now. As noted in our response to the Commission's second question, electric co-ops and municipal utilities in Virginia would benefit from an infusion of CARES Act funding, as well as from the federal Paycheck Protection Program ("PPP"). The Commission should direct these not-for-profit utilities to apply for PPP funds that may provide them with assistance during this time of hardship. There are $5 billion in available, forgivable PPP loans to electric cooperatives that do not expire until the end of June.[29] There is also a federal bill currently awaiting the president's signature that would extend the period under which recipients could spend their approved loan proceeds to the end of 2020 and extend the repayment term for unforgivable portions of the loan to five years.[30] These two changes make it easier for electric cooperatives to maintain financial viability for an extended period of time, allowing the co-ops greater flexibility to work with their members on repayment agreements.

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[27] Petition of Virginia, Maryland and Delaware Association of Electric Cooperatives in Response to the Virginia State Corporation Commission's Order to Suspend Utility Service Disconnections during State of Emergency, Case No. PUR-2020-00049. https://scc.virginia.gov/docketsearch/DOCS/4lwb01!.PDF
[28] *Id.*
[29] US Small Business Administration. Business Loan Program Temporary Changes: Paycheck Protection Program-Eligibility of Certain Electric Cooperatives. May 19, 2020. https://beta.regulations.gov/document/SBA-2020-0029-0001
[30] Medici, Andy. "Congress approves sweeping changes to PPP. Here are the details." Washington Business Journal. June 3, 2020. https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2020/06/03/congress-ppp-loan-change-bill-passes.html

Finally, establishing extended repayment requirements for those who do fall into arrears as a result of the pandemic will be a necessary step in the process of financial recovery. The SCC should provide guidance to all utilities on how to establish these plans.

Comment 3: Allowing the moratorium to expire as summer begins and temperatures start to rise will place households in even greater risk of losing utility services due to higher cooling bills, thus placing them at greater risk of experiencing negative health outcomes.

While residential electricity demand is already higher as a result of people spending more time at home during the pandemic (up by 11 percent in the PJM region through April 26 compared to typical demand),[31] when summer temperatures begin to set in, electric bills will begin to spike in many parts of the Commonwealth due to increased cooling demand. This will place even greater strain on vulnerable households, especially those that have accumulated utility bill debt over the past few months. Allowing the moratorium to expire at the onset of summer will significantly increase the risk that those households will be disconnected. Households whose electricity is disconnected when temperatures rise will be at severe risk of heat-related illnesses and even death. As recently reported by The Guardian, "[t]his year is on track to be one of the hottest on record, and public health officials worry that in cities across the US, summer heatwaves will collide with the coronavirus pandemic, with deadly consequences for poor, minority and older populations."[32]

Given these potential consequences, it would be unconscionable for the Commission to allow the moratorium to expire just before the summer season begins. A 120-day extension of the moratorium would ensure that households—especially Virginia's most vulnerable households—can maintain vital access to utility services such as electricity and water, which are critical for keeping homes safe, comfortable and hygienic during a public health crisis.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments and for all you have done to protect residents of the Commonwealth thus far. It is incumbent upon the Commission to extend that protection until families and individuals are no longer at risk of losing basic, vital utilities that are critical for survival and protecting the public health.

Respectfully,

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[31] ICF International Inc. "Where has all the load gone?" May 8, 2020. https://www.icf.com/insights/energy/load-impacts-COVID-19

[32] Singh, Maanvi. "'A summer unlike any other': heatwaves and COVID-19 are a deadly combination." The Guardian. May 30, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/30/coronavirus-heatwaves-health-summer-us-cities?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

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