

Politics & Government

Lawmakers consider barring heat shutoffs for homes with infants

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HARTFORD — State lawmakers are discussing a measure that would bar utility companies from shutting off electricity or gas to households with children under 2 years old.

Those who voiced their support Tuesday for the bill before the legislature's Energy and Technology Committee said infants and babies don't have the ability to regulate their bodies' temperatures as well as older children and adults do, making them particularly vulnerable to heat shutoffs.

These children also suffer from the secondary effects of living in a cold home — they are more likely to be exposed to carbon monoxide and to be burned by stoves and candles used for heat and light when utilities are shut off, said Bonnie B. Roswig, a lawyer for the Hartford-based Center for Children's Advocacy Medical-Legal Partnership Project.

And households facing utility shutoffs sometimes choose heat over food, leading to nutrition problems for those children, Roswig said.

Opponents maintain that increasing the assistance for these households would increase everyone else's rates — even pushing some over the edge into financial distress.

Department of Public Utility Control Chairman Kevin DelGobbo said that while the proposal to bar utilities from shutting off or refusing to reinstate electricity and gas at any time of year to homes with children under 24 months old is "absolutely laudable in its intent," it would offer a protection "that we believe already exists in large part."

State law bars utilities from shutting off heat during the colder half of the year to those who can't pay their bills. But the companies can turn off the heat in the warmer months and then refuse to reinstate it when the next winter arrives if the customer hasn't paid 20 percent of the balance, \$100, or another agreed-upon minimum payment, whichever is least.

DelGobbo said extra protection for households with children under 2 could lead to increased abuse of the law.

"You could have untold thousands of people deciding not to pay their bills because of that protection, and all other utility ratepayers, in effect, pick up the tab for that," he said.

Any customer already can work with a utility company to draw up a payment plan to avoid shutoffs, DelGobbo said.

Joseph Thomas of United Illuminating said his company offers customers many ways to avoid shutoffs.

"We're proactively trying to work with customers to help them navigate through these difficult times," Thomas said.

He said about 80,000 of United Illuminating's 325,000 customers aren't paying their bills. Of that 80,000, only about 20,000 have shown a financial hardship or medical condition that has prevented them from paying, Thomas said.

Increasing the law's protections to households with young children would force the utility companies to build computer databases and keep track of children's ages and addresses, driving up costs for all customers, Thomas and DelGobbo said.

Neither side could offer data on how many households would be affected by the proposal or how much rates could increase if the proposal became law.

Rep. Henry Genga, D-East Hartford, said he wanted to see such data.

"I don't know the size of the problem," Genga said, but added that he supports the idea of the proposal.

Committee ranking member Rep. Sean J. Williams, R-Watertown, said he is concerned about those with young children who could afford to pay their utility bills choosing not to because they would know the law protected them from shutoffs.

Shirley Bergert, director of the public benefits task force at Windham-based Connecticut Legal Services, said the bill would restrict only one collection tactic for utility companies. The companies still could sue customers who can pay but choose not to, Bergert said.