

Sen. Chris Murphy demands utilities ‘take responsibility’ for protecting eligible low-income families from utility shut-offs

By JOSH KOVNER
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In a letter to Connecticut regulators Thursday, Murphy said he doesn't believe the state's utility companies are doing enough to prevent eligible low-income customers from having their power disconnected during the winter months.

U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy told regulators Thursday he doesn't believe Connecticut's power companies are complying with an order to insulate thousands of low-income families from utility disconnections during the annual, six-month-long winter protection period — an established program that prohibits disconnections from November to May.

Despite a direct, and advocates say unprecedented, order from the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority in December instructing Eversource and United Illuminating to identify and extend the full protection to thousands of families who are eligible for hardship assistance, lawyers for poor children and adults have testified before PURA that families have continue to get shut-off notices this winter and at best are receiving 60 days of temporary protection from Eversource and 13 days from UI.

There may be tens of thousands of eligible families in northern Connecticut alone — and PURA Chairwoman Marissa Gillett has told the power companies that part of the problem is that no one knows how many of these unrecognized hardship cases are out there.

The companies were ordered to prepare scripts for their call-takers that get right to the question of hardship. It can be easily demonstrated because these families are also eligible, and most do receive, food stamps, disability benefits and other state and federal assistance. The companies were also ordered to hold a series of neighborhood meetings in areas hardest hit by annual utility shut-offs — which doubled to nearly 81,000 from 2014 to 2018 in Eversource's territory alone.

In a letter to Gillett dated Thursday and filed with PURA, Murphy, D-Conn., noted the “dramatic” increase in shut-offs “despite an improving economy and a variety of hardship repayment programs for delinquent customers.” And he said PURA's December order “rightfully calls on Eversource and United Illuminating to take appropriate steps to ensure that families eligible for hardship protections are receiving them.

“I remained concerned, however,” Murphy continued, “that the companies are not adequately complying with this directive, and I urge you to ensure that their call scripts and factsheets meet the spirit and intent” of the order.

Murphy, whose staff has been researching the issues, staying in touch with advocates and following newspaper coverage, said eligible customers “remained uninformed” of the companies' arrearage forgiveness programs intended to help families “to maintain year-round service while paying down a delinquent balance on their bills.”

Gillett noted the PURA order directed the utilities to make use of existing programs that enable needy families to keep the heat and the lights on during the time they need it the most.

“The authority's directive was clear and our intent is explicit: programs and resources exist to help those in need,” Gillett said in a statement to The Courant.

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She said it's “imperative that communication by the utilities with these vulnerable customers is equally direct. We asked for feedback on the call center scripts and fact sheets submitted by the utilities, and we're grateful that the senator and advocates answered,”

The authority “will continue to take aggressive, meaningful action to ensure the materials mirror our intent and that other barriers are removed,” Gillett said.

She has asked utility officials, advocates, energy-assistance staff members, and state social-service representatives to work together on a “100-day sprint” toward a consensus on how to approach the untapped population of needy families and to arrive at a series of more permanent solutions. For example, the Department of Social Services could change its mind and agree to provide the utility companies with a list of families who already received other benefits. So far, DSS has declined to do that.

Under the PURA order, the utility companies on Jan. 17 submitted sample call-center scripts that were supposed to increase the number of families recognized as hardship cases and decrease the number of utility shut-off notices that are being sent out during the winter moratorium.

Lawyers with Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Connecticut Legal Services and the Center for Children’s Advocacy in Hartford quickly produced written comments pointing out what they see as the shortcomings of the sample scripts.

“The proposed scripting never affirmatively informs ratepayers about the statutory requirements of hardship programs,” lawyer Bonnie Roswig of the Center for Children’s Advocacy wrote in comments filed with PURA.

“At best,” Roswig wrote, “the Companies are not focused on helping potential hardship customers. At worst, the Companies appear to be actively attempting to discourage eligible ratepayers from seeking hardship protection. The Center urges the Authority to step in and intervene and require substantial revisions to both the scripting and the Fact Sheets as soon as possible.”

Murphy said he shared that perception.

“I am concerned that the call-center scripts and fact sheets submitted on Jan. 17 ... do not sufficiently comply with PURA’s decision, and that hardship-eligible residents will continue to face disconnections because the companies are refusing to clearly and immediately inform them about the winter protection plan and utility-forgiveness programs,” he said, in the letter to Gillett.

“I encourage you,” Murphy continued, “to ensure that the companies either redo the [submissions] ... or that you develop your own scripting and fact sheets that the companies shall be required to use to properly inform customers of these resources.

“Going forward, it is critical that the companies promptly improve customer outreach and take responsibility for informing customers of these regulatory protections.”

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