



## Billing Assistance Is Available, But Regulators Say Utilities Didn't Do Enough To Tell Customers

By PATRICK SKAHILL • SEP 25, 2020

Connecticut's ban on utility shut-offs during the COVID-19 pandemic will expire at the end of the month, but state regulators said last week that utility companies haven't done enough to educate customers about alternative payment programs.

On Wednesday, the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA) told utilities they had to email customers a verbatim message: COVID-19 payment plans "are available to any customer requesting financial assistance, without demonstrating financial need."

**Bonnie Roswig, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy, said clear messaging matters.**

**"The companies simply were not doing that specific, direct dissemination of information," Roswig said. "Which is why PURA was very specific in this current order in saying you have to do this in the way we direct you to."**

**Roswig said customers struggling to pay their bills should first call the utility and ask "to be coded for hardship," which is an income-eligible assistance program that protects Connecticut customers from utility shut-offs between November and May.**

**"That should immediately start the protection that will really last you through May 1 and will give customers the opportunity to enter into affordable payment arrangements," Roswig said.**

**If customers don't qualify for hardship status or other alternative payment programs, Roswig said they should get enrolled in a COVID-19 payment plan.**

Those plans can extend repayment of missed bills over 2 years and waive any fees or interest in the calculation of the monthly payment amount.

Roswig said that as COVID-19 drove more customers into financial difficulty, many of those people didn't even know these programs existed.

State regulators agreed, directing utilities in their Wednesday order to notify all customers in clear language that if rate-payers are struggling with their bills, they need to contact their utility company and ask to be either "coded hardship" or placed on a COVID-19 payment plan.

PURA has also extended the shut-off moratorium for "financial hardship" customers through Oct. 31. The deadline for residential and non-residential customers to enroll in a COVID-19 payment plan is Nov. 1.

Eversource And UI Respond To PURA Energy Assistance Motion

Eversource, which has been in the crosshairs of politicians, regulators and customers in recent months over billing hikes and its response to Tropical Storm Isaias, said in a Friday afternoon statement it worked to educate customers about alternative payment plans.

"We have regularly promoted the COVID-19 payment plan and all of its benefits to customers through various channels including customer emails, on-bill messages, bill inserts, news releases, social media posts and several media interviews," spokesperson Mitch Gross wrote in an email.

The company says 38,480 electric customers (3.1% of 1.26 million) are on a “COVID arrangement” or low-income program. For natural gas, Eversource says the total is 16,907 customers on a “COVID arrangement” or low-income program (7% of 241,000).

“We will continue to work one-on-one with customers who are having a difficult time paying their energy bill and encourage customers to contact us at Eversource.com or call us at 1-800-826-2000,” Gross said.

United Illuminating said the company had 4,125, or 1.2% of about 339,000 electric customers, enrolled in COVID-19 payment plans as of the end of August.

In a statement, the utility said it has been working to educate customers about payment options during the pandemic.

“Our companies have been communicating with customers continuously about the availability of the COVID Payment Program, as well as the resumption of regular collection activities,” UI spokesperson Ed Crowder said in an email.

“These efforts have included direct outreach via multiple channels to customers with unpaid bills, as well as mass customer communications and media outreach. We are also working with nonprofit partners to get word out to harder-to-reach communities,” Crowder said. “We appreciate the additional guidance from PURA.”

<https://www.wnpr.org/post/billing-assistance-available-regulators-say-utilities-didnt-do-enough-tell-customers>