

## **PURA Opts for Existing Programs Over Shutoff Moratorium**

A moratorium could have shifted costs to paying customers

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The Public Utilities Regulatory Authority ruled in a virtual hearing on Friday morning that it would not renew the statewide moratorium on electricity and gas shutoffs which expired on October 1.

Eversource had filed a motion to extend the moratorium on September 30. Under current regulations, an extension would have allowed Eversource to offset the cost of customers unable to pay their bills by increasing costs for paying customers. Without a moratorium, Eversource has no legal right to these funds.

Eversource representatives at the hearing said that they wanted to have the moratorium in place for the sake of “clarity and alignment,” at a time when many Connecticut residents are unable to make payments due to economic fallout from the COVID pandemic.

According Eversource Vice President of Operations Jessica Cain, enrollment in payment programs has nearly doubled since the start of the pandemic. Eversource currently has 65,000 individuals enrolled in payment arrangements or matching payment programs. Cain said that 125,000 households currently have a past due balance of greater than \$125, leaving them eligible to receive a disconnect notice.

State Sen. Norm Needleman, D-Essex, who chairs the Energy and Technology Committee in the state legislature, said he believes that the decision will be revisited before the Winter Protection Program’s no-shut-off policy is lifted next May.

According to PURA Chair Marissa Gillett, 15 states never put in place a shut off moratorium and 18 others have already allowed their moratoria to lapse. Companies in those states, she said, voluntarily decided not to shut off power for any of their customers. “If the moratorium is the right thing to do, as Eversource claims, then they will have no problem exercising their discretion to voluntarily extend the moratorium until such time that the emergency has passed. The authority declines to do so,” said Gillett.

### **Taking advantage of existing programs**

In the hearing, Gillett asserted that ratepayers should already be protected by the COVID-19 payment program and the hardship programs the agency has in place. But Gillett also noted that the state regulator’s Office of Education and Enforcement had found that Eversource has not adequately informed energy customers of these programs.

“Eversource has consistently failed to appropriately and clearly communicate with its customers about various statutory and regulatory protections that are available,” said Gillett.

Eversource provides electricity to 2.2 million Connecticut residents and provides natural gas to 200,000 residents in the state.

During the hearing, Cain countered that the energy provider has made numerous attempts to communicate with its customers — including 15 emails, six letters and over 20,000 calls — to explain their options.

Needleman told Connecticut Examiner that he thinks it can be challenging to get people to read the materials that Eversource provides, like bill inserts or posts on social media. “Somehow we need to find a better way for the public to understand their rights and protections right now,” he said.

Tricia Mortifica, a spokesperson for Eversource, said the company would continue working with customers having difficulty paying their bills.

**Attorney Bonnie Roswig, of the Center for Children’s Advocacy, told Connecticut Examiner that the lack of information about the hardship program in particular is an ongoing problem. “The problem has been, as it has always been, that the companies do not tell people about the program,” she said.**

**Roswig said that many of her clients — often low-income families with children — don’t know what options are available to them.**

**“My client community does not read online media, nor do they listen to PURA hearings,” she said. “They are very concerned that their services are going to be terminated.”**

By enrolling in the COVID-19 payment program, customers can pay their past-due bills over a 24-month period without risk of having their utilities shut off. Any fees or interest are waived, and customers do not have to demonstrate financial need in order to enroll in the program.

PURA has extended the enrollment period for the COVID-19 payment program until February 9, 2020.

Additionally, customers who earn less than 60 percent of the state’s median income or who have a medical condition preventing them from paying the full cost of their bills, can qualify for assistance through the state’s Winter Protection Program. Under this program, utility companies are prevented from shutting off customers’ electric and gas between November 1 and May 1.

**“We don’t want anyone to live in a house in the dark or the cold,” said Roswig, adding that a lack of basic utilities can affect people’s health, their ability to remain in rental housing and whether children stay in school.**

**“Living in a household without light and without heat just opens up a whole panoply of issues,” she said.**