

# COVID-19 Utility Customer Support Program Guidance

All utilities have a general obligation to provide safe, reliable, and affordable essential services to their customers. On April 20<sup>th</sup>, Governor Inslee announced [Washington's Recovery Plan](#), which includes ensuring access to essential services during the state's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. On May 1, Governor Inslee announced the "[Safe Start](#)" approach for Washington state to begin reopening some businesses safely and continue essential businesses. On May 31, Governor Inslee issued Proclamation 20-23.4, extending and amending Proclamation 20-23, pertaining to Utility Ratepayer Assistance and Preservation of Essential Services through July 30, 2020.

This guidance document provides a framework for ensuring that customers experiencing economic hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic maintain access to essential services after Proclamation 20-23 expires. Before July 10, 2020, utilities should review existing policies concerning disconnection of service, reconnection of service, payment arrangements, and suspension of other fees or charges, and update those policies as appropriate and necessary to keep vulnerable individuals and households connected to essential services during the economic recovery.

## **Utility COVID-19 Customer Notification Guidance:**

Utility customers have access to reliable and accurate information about emergency relief that may be available.

1. Each utility providing energy, telecommunications or water services is strongly encouraged to post a link to the most recent version of Proclamation 20-23 on their website, with this statement:

*Governor Inslee has issued Proclamation 20-23, pertaining to Utility Ratepayer Assistance and Preservation of Essential Services. [Utility Name] is committed to keeping our customers connected to essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency. If you are experiencing hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, you may be eligible for support, including long-term payment arrangements or bill assistance. This Proclamation does not relieve customers from the obligation to pay for utility services.*

2. The Utilities and Transportation Commission will serve as the single point of contact within state government for customers seeking bill assistance information. Each utility providing energy, telecommunications or water service in the state should post information on their website directing customers to the state's single point of contact for bill assistance information: Utilities and Transportation Commission Consumer Hotline: 1-888-333-WUTC (9882) or [consumer@utc.wa.gov](mailto:consumer@utc.wa.gov).

### **Utility COVID-19 Customer Support Programs:**

Each utility providing energy, telecommunications and water services must offer COVID-19 Customer Support programs consistent with this guidance. The programs may include existing Customer Support programs that help customers stay connected to essential services. All programs must be reviewed subject to a public process, consistent with the utility's standard practice, and prominently posted on a public website. Utilities should also notify customers of their COVID-19 Customer Support Programs in a bill insert, mailing, or other appropriate method of communication.

Each utility's programs must be consistent with the following principles:

1. Customers should maintain access to essential services during the state's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilities should take active steps to review current customer assistance programs, and modify them, as appropriate, to address the needs of customers going forward, especially low-income and vulnerable individuals and households.
2. Utilities should offer long-term payment arrangements to all customers with arrearage balances. Payment plans should be tailored to address individual customer needs, with longer term payment plans advised for customers with high arrearage balances.
3. Utilities should help identify customers experiencing economic hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and help them gain access to existing and future bill assistance funds, consistent with the methods allowed under Proclamation 20-23.4.
4. All customers with arrearage balances should be notified of bill assistance funds available through the utility.

### **Public Information Requirements:**

All COVID-19 Utility Customer Support Programs should be posted on a publically accessible website that can be easily accessed from a link on a statewide resource, such as the [Department of Commerce's Electric and Natural Gas Rate Payer Assistance Resource](#).

Each utility must submit the following information to the Department of Health for water utilities, and the Department of Commerce for electric and natural gas utilities:

1. For water utilities, a copy of the utility's response to the Department of Health's Utility Economic Impact and Infrastructure Needs Survey, and any subsequent updates.
2. For energy utilities, a copy of the utility's response to the Department of Commerce's Electric and Natural Gas Sector Economic Impact Survey, and any subsequent updates.

The Utilities and Transportation Commission for investor-owned utilities and the governing bodies of consumer-owned utilities are encouraged to adopt additional reporting requirements, as necessary and appropriate to provide oversight over utility COVID-19 Customer Support Programs.

**Statewide Resource Point of Contact:**

The Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC) Consumer Protection Help Line will serve as a single point of contact for all utility customers with questions about bill assistance programs in the state. The UTC will coordinate with utilities subject to its jurisdiction, as well as the Department of Commerce, consumer-owned utilities, and local community action agencies, to develop a statewide resource for customers in need of assistance, and direct customers to available resources.

**This guidance is not comprehensive, and additional requirements may be adopted, as appropriate. Utilities may adopt other measures to support their customers' continued access to essential services, subject to approval by the Utilities and Transportation Commission for investor-owned utilities and the governing boards of consumer-owned utilities.**