

COMMENT LETTER TO UTILITIES & TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION  
On COVID-19 and Impacts to Utility Customers, Docket # U-200281June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the impacts of COVID-19 to utility customers, Docket # U-200281.

I am writing to you on behalf of Puget Sound Sage, a non-profit that works with Indigenous, Black, Brown, and low-income communities in the South Seattle and South King County regions. We are writing to ask that you develop policy that supports those most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in surviving and recovering from this crisis.

As the regulator of investor-owned utilities, you have the authority to keep Washingtonians' lights on, keep water running, and preserve phone and internet access. You have the power to ensure low-income and poor Washingtonians do not emerge with utility debt they cannot afford to pay, stacked on top of mortgage and rent, food, medical, transportation, and childcare and eldercare expenses.

Please use this power to put short- and long-term protections in place for utility customers, especially Indigenous, Black, Brown, and low-income customers who are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, on top of centuries of systemic racism and oppression. We are dying (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/06/16/race-gaps-in-covid-19-deaths-are-even-bigger-than-they-appear/>) and losing our jobs at higher rates (<https://www.policylink.org/our-work/economy/national-equity-atlas/COVID-workforce>).

Prior to the pandemic, Sage completed research (<https://www.pugetsoundsage.org/research/clean-healthy-environment/community-energy/>) on how to equitably transition to renewable energy. We worked with 11 community-based organizations and 1 union, over 450 participants, and 30 community leaders. Our work was translated into 10 languages. Of our surveyed communities 81% identify as people of color, 90% have a household income below the Area Median Income, 48% earn less than \$30,000 per year, and 35% identify as having a disability. **Our research found that access to energy is a basic need, and for some members of our community, a literal matter of life and death.** 18% of our respondents use an assistive, mobility, medical device, or medicine that relies on energy. This includes ventilators, which allow people to breathe. Yet, when households were hit by a utility bill just \$50 higher than normal, households report cutting basic needs including rent and mortgage payments, food, medicines, and childcare/eldercare. Our communities are making choices between putting food on the table and keeping the lights on.

Our survey found that Seattle City Light was meeting 72% of the need for low-income bill assistance amongst eligible households, whereas Puget Sound Energy was only meeting 33% of the need. Households making less than \$30,000/year report not hearing about low-income energy assistance, not qualifying, and applications being too much of a hassle as the top reasons for not enrolling in bill assistance programs.

And that was before the pandemic hit, before hundreds of thousands of Washington families became unemployed with no income.

As short-term fixes, our communities need you to:

1. Extend the moratorium on utility shut-offs indefinitely.
  - The pandemic will likely extend beyond this year. Economic recovery will surely take longer. We must ensure that all Washingtonians have access to utilities for the duration of the pandemic and through recovery. Our access to these basic services should not be determined by our race, our income, our gender, our ability, our citizenship status, or the language we speak at home.
2. Erase the utility debt of poor and low-income households accrued since the start of the pandemic and through recovery.
  - Avenues of payment for this debt include shareholder profit and socialization of rates.
3. Institute 4-6% of income arrearage payment plans for households of moderate income struggling with utility debt.

Failure to advance these principles will be a choice to widen existing disparities. It will be a choice to rebuild Washington on the backs of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low-income communities while enabling wealthy and white communities to amass more wealth and resources. The crisis is not over and neither can be the supports to weather it. Please take action now to ensure that all Washingtonians can weather and bounce forward from this crisis. .

Sincerely,

Katrina Peterson, Climate Justice Program Manager at Puget Sound Sage