

Dear Governor DeWine and Chairman Randazzo,

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has proven that access to water, power, and the internet are human rights integral to preserving the health and safety of all Ohio residents. We are grateful for the work that the Governor has done thus far to ensure households have access to utility services. The State must go further, however, to ensure that households continue to have access to these essential services during the pandemic, and to break the cycle of energy poverty set to accelerate as the financial impact of COVID-19 takes its toll.

We call on the Governor to enact through the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) the following policies:

1. Order utilities regulated by the PUCO to **extend a shutoff moratorium, freeze rates, and waive—not defer—reconnection fees** for all households now through a 90-day grace period beyond the end of Ohio's State of Emergency.
2. **Eliminate all unpaid utility costs accrued during the state of emergency and 90-day grace period** by households with incomes equal to or less than 200% of the poverty line
3. **Shore up the Percentage of Income Payment Plan Plus (PIPP) program to interrupt the cycle of energy poverty.** Grant households enrolled in PIPP 12 months—rather than the current 1 month—to make up for any missed payments during the pandemic. Require regulated utilities to institute a new 18-month extended repayment plan for households not enrolled in PIPP.
4. By May 15, **order regulated utilities to publicly share a plan to immediately re-establish water, gas, electricity, and telecommunications services** to anyone who has lost them before and during the pandemic.
5. **Put Ohioans back to work and break the cycle of energy poverty** through an economic stimulus package focused on low-income home weatherization by doing two things: Lobbying for Federal funds for low-income home weatherization; and requiring utilities regulated by the PUCO to invest 2% of annual profits in low-income home weatherization.
6. **Order utilities regulated by PUCO to each month disclose county-by-county aggregate data** regarding the number of homes disconnected from utilities prior to the State of Emergency, the number of reconnections resulting from the order, the number of homes saved from disconnection since the order went into effect, and enrollment in low-income repayment programs. Begin disclosing this information during Ohio's State of Emergency and continue on a monthly basis thereafter.
7. **Commit to expanding generation of distributed clean, renewable energy in Ohio,** which will reduce airborne pollution from fossil fuel plants, an environmental injustice borne disproportionately by low-income communities and communities of color, that increases health risks associated with COVID-19.

Implementing these policies will ensure that our state is prepared to protect its residents now and spur economic recovery in the future.

Both public and private utilities must continue to guarantee access to their services and address COVID-19's looming fiscal cliff far beyond the end of our current State of Emergency. Households unable to pay their utility bills are watching their arrears pile up as utilities charge late fees, interest, shutoff penalties, reconnection fees, and other costs.

As Ohio's unemployment rate rises, it is clear many households will be unable to immediately pay their past due balance. We must act now to ensure utility service continues to every Ohio household during the pandemic and 90 days after the end of Ohio's State of Emergency. By April 25, over 1 million Ohioans had filed for unemployment insurance, surpassing the combined total of 715,512 for the past two years. Evidence from seasonal disconnection bans shows that when those bans expire, shutoff rates spike because households are unable to pay their bills.

One in four households in Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland spent more than 13% of their income on home energy costs before the pandemic, which is among the most severe energy burdens in the nation, according to research from the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy. Greater funding for low-income home weatherization programs can break the cycle of energy poverty that afflict low-income Ohioans, while also supporting long-term investments in public health by promoting healthy homes. We can build on the successes from the Great Recession of 2008, when additional funding to home weatherization created jobs and spurred economic recovery.

As the current crisis continues, it is also necessary to provide additional protections for low-income families currently enrolled in PIPP and families experiencing difficulty paying their bills for the first time. A new 18-month extended payment plan for households not enrolled in PIPP would create another option for households that have fallen behind on their bills during the pandemic.

Utilities must take a more proactive role in reconnecting households, including through mail and telephone outreach to customers, media and social services outreach, and, when safe, automatic reconnections to ensure that no one is without water, electricity, gas, or telecommunications during this pandemic.

As utilities reconnect customers and enroll households affected economically in payment plans, they must do so with transparency and release monthly data updating the public on their progress.

The current public health and economic crises have also shown that it is time to reevaluate the affordability and resiliency of our current energy system. Much of Ohio's energy comes from expensive coal-fired power plants. Increased investment in distributed, renewable sources of energy would help Ohio move towards energy independence, while also creating much-needed jobs and potentially decreasing the cost of electricity. It could also decrease air pollution, which causes chronic respiratory illness. Ohio is sixth in the nation for children's asthma rates, putting our children even more at risk should they contract COVID-19.

The State of Ohio has an opportunity to ensure we survive the COVID-19 pandemic—and future crises—with dignity. Sustaining utility service and ensuring affordability for households is an essential step.

Sincerely,

Alliance for the Great Lakes
Athens County's Future Action Network
Buckeye Environmental Network
CAIN-Churches Active in Northside
Carve Your Own Path, Inc.
Church of Our Saviour/La Iglesia de Nuestro Salvador
CityMusic Cleveland
Cleveland Bi+ Network
Cleveland Jobs with Justice
Cleveland Kings Action PAC
Cleveland Move to Amend
Cleveland Nonviolence Network
Cleveland Owns
Clevelanders for Public Transit
Columbus Coalition for the Homeless
Communities United for Action
Community Shares of Greater Cincinnati
Co-op Cincy
Cuyahoga County Progressive Caucus
End Poverty Now Coalition
Environmental Justice Ministries of the United Church of Christ
Equality Ohio
The Fair Housing Center (Toledo)
Fair Housing Center for Rights & Research
Food & Water Action
Food Not Bombs Lake Co. & East Side CLE
Freshwater Future
Intercommunity Justice and Peace Center
Interreligious Task Force on Central America and Colombia
Junction Coalition
Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry
Miami Valley Fair Housing Center, Inc.
Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition
Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless
Ohio Citizen Action
Ohio Consumers Power Alliance
Ohio Environmental Council
Ohio Poor People's Campaign
Ohio Student Association
Organize Ohio
Our Revolution Ohio
Policy Matters
Preterm
Safe Families for Children
Sierra Club- Ohio Chapter
Sierra Club- Ready for 100 Campaign
Solar United Neighbors
St. Edward High School Labre Ministry
Sunrise Cleveland
Sunrise Dayton
Unitarian Universalist Justice Ohio

University Settlement