

**SUBJECT: Access to utilities needed during the pandemic**  
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A statewide coalition representing nearly a hundred thousand Ohioans released a new set of demands calling on Governor Mike DeWine and PUCO Chairman Sam Randazzo to ensure every Ohioan has access to basic water, power, and broadband internet during the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic fallout.

Gov. DeWine has taken much-needed steps to ensure that Ohioans have access to utilities throughout the state of emergency, but more must be done to guarantee continued access once the state of emergency is lifted and Ohioans try to recover from the current economic crisis. Although many regulated utilities have taken steps to reconnect households in response to the crisis, most of those steps have been voluntary and unenforceable. Most regulated utilities are only deferring reconnection fees, rather than waiving such penalties entirely.

This is a matter of public health: how can you wash your hands without water? This is a matter of public education: how can children be properly homeschooled without access to power and broadband? This is about economic recovery: how can Ohioans keep working from home without adequate utilities?

Without clear and humane statewide guidelines for all utilities, and without a plan to alleviate the financial burden facing households affected by the ongoing crisis, Ohioans face uncertainty about how they will maintain access to essential utility services. State regulators have asked investor-owned utilities to submit a plan to deal with the crisis, but there is no deadline or transparency regarding these submissions. In comparison, the Ohio EPA has ordered that all public water utilities stop shutoffs, reconnect all households and waive reconnection fees.

“Too many Ohio families are on the brink of a fiscal cliff,” said Rachael Belz, Executive Director for Ohio Citizen Action, one of 52 co-sponsors of the effort. “As bills for electricity, water, gas, and internet come due, hundreds of thousands of Ohioians who have lost jobs and income due to the crisis are at risk for shutoffs. Without these basic services for all, our economic recovery will be uneven and ineffective. We need decisive action from state policy makers right now.”

The demands from the coalition include waiving reconnection fees, late penalties and interest on overdue bills during the pandemic. There must also be a debt-relief plan to eliminate unpaid bills by families impacted by the crisis. The group also calls for publicly released, monthly data from utilities on disconnections and reconnections, for increased use of distributed renewable energy that both saves money and creates jobs and for a stimulus package to put people to work weatherizing the homes of low-income households.

“No one should go broke paying for gas and electricity,” said Amanda Woodrum, Senior Researcher with Ohio Policy Matters. “By funding programs to better insulate and seal drafty homes in low-income neighborhoods and communities, Ohio policymakers can put people back to work, reduce energy costs and make sure everyone can keep the lights on and stay warm.”

“It’s unconscionable to deny people access to water and lights because it’s unprofitable,” said Yvonka Hall, Executive Director of the Northeast Ohio Black Health Coalition, referring to the for-profit business model of private regulated utilities. “The state must make sure that African-

American households, who are getting sick at disproportionate rates, are not also adversely affected by inhumane utility policy.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the disturbing flaws in our current utility systems. Access to water, power and internet is essential to families trying to survive a 21st century global pandemic, and that has been made even clearer by how this ongoing crisis has reshaped day-to-day lives and forced many Ohioans to stay at home.

The coalition is demanding that changes to the current utility system be made now and that these improvements be maintained beyond the state of emergency, ensuring long-term energy affordability and spurring economic recovery during a pandemic that is far from over.