



Indiana Office of Utility
Consumer Counselor

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OUCC Seeks New Ratepayer Protections in Wake of COVID-19

As Hoosiers continue to face unprecedented health and financial hardships due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the state's utility consumer advocate is calling for short- and long-term ratepayer protections.

The Indiana Office of Utility Consumer Counselor (OUCC), the state agency representing consumer interests in cases before the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission (IURC), is asking the IURC to open a formal investigation into how utilities will deal with present and future overdue utility accounts, along with the impacts of COVID-19 on utility rates and services statewide.

All disconnections by Indiana utilities are currently suspended through June 4, 2020 under Gov. Eric J. Holcomb's Executive Orders. Without the suspension, utilities could enforce disconnections. Utilities also have broad discretion for setting payment plan parameters. No uniform protections are in place for likely arrearages that may yet develop during the pandemic.

The OUCC requests a two-phase approach to the proposed investigation. In Phase One, the agency asks the IURC to order all jurisdictional utilities to:

- Extend the suspension of disconnections for an appropriate timeframe beyond June 4,
- Waive all deposits, late fees, convenience fees, and reconnection fees,
- Expand the use of payment arrangements to assist customers, and
- Immediately start documenting and accounting for assets and liabilities related to stayed disconnections, waived fees, and extended payment plans.

"The full impact of the pandemic's economic consequences will slowly emerge throughout the months ahead," said Indiana Utility Consumer Counselor Bill Fine. "This extraordinary and unprecedented situation calls for new protections to ensure that all Hoosiers have access to essential services, especially consumers who are suffering loss of income through no fault of their own."

Phase Two of the investigation would focus on longer-term issues related to COVID-19. Among other things, the issues would include consideration of appropriate methodology to review the reasonableness, necessity, and prudence of any COVID-19-related cost recovery requests in future rate cases.

(Continued)

The IURC has jurisdiction over most Indiana investor-owned electric, natural gas, and water/wastewater utilities along with certain municipal and not-for-profit utilities.

Most municipal water and electric utilities have withdrawn from IURC oversight as allowed by state law, as have all of the state's rural electric membership cooperatives (REMCs). The IURC does not have jurisdiction over municipal sewer utilities, telecommunications companies, or broadband service providers. In its petition, the OUC encourages non-jurisdictional utilities to similarly suspend disconnections, waive certain fees, and expand customer payment arrangements.

(IURC Cause No. 45380)

The Indiana Office of Utility Consumer Counselor (OUCC) represents Indiana consumer interests before state and federal bodies that regulate utilities. As a state agency, the OUCC's mission is to represent all Indiana consumers to ensure quality, reliable utility services at the most reasonable prices possible through dedicated advocacy, consumer education, and creative problem solving.

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