News From

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LOUISIANA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSIONER

For Release 15 March 2020
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ORDER PROHIBITS UTILITY DISCONNECTIONS DURING VIRUS EMERGENCY

Most Louisiana utility customers put at economic risk by coronavirus won't have to lose service for missing a payment, thanks to an emergency order by the Louisiana Public Service Commission.

The LPSC issued an order drafted by commission Executive Secretary Brandon Frey on Friday. It directs Entergy, Cleco and SWEPCO -- and a host of other electric, natural gas, telephone, water and sewer companies regulated by the LPSC -- to immediately stop disconnecting customers for non-payment of their bills.

The comprehensive order covers millions of utility customers across all parts of Louisiana. It only exempts situations where concerns of public safety cause a utility to disconnect a customer, such as a gas leak. It will remain in place until the LPSC changes or revokes it.

The order cites Gov. John Bel Edwards' March 11th declaration of a public health emergency. It says: "Given the severity of these events, and the uncertain impact it may have on Commission-jurisdictional ratepayers, immediate action is required to ensure utility service is not disconnected for non-payment."

The five-member LPSC was scheduled to meet Wednesday, March 18, but due to the virus that meeting has been postponed by Chairman Mike Francis. Frey said consideration of the LPSC emergency order and other agenda items will be postponed until the Commission's April 15 meeting.

Foster Campbell, North Louisiana's representative on the LPSC, said the public's health and wellbeing during the coronavirus crisis requires access to drinking water, electricity and other utilities.

"Louisiana utility customers need the assurance their homes won't go dark and cold as we fight this worldwide virus," said Foster Campbell, North Louisiana's representative on the LPSC. "We all hope for a swift return to normal life for our state and nation, but it's hard to say how soon that will be.

"Until we recover, customers who miss a paycheck or two because of virus disruption won't have to worry about utilities. They can catch up when the virus is overcome and their paychecks return to normal."

The order only covers utilities regulated by the LPSC, including Entergy, Cleco, SWEPCO, Louisiana's rural electric cooperatives, Atmos Energy, CenterPoint Energy, AT&T, CenturyLink and a host of other for-profit companies. It does not waive bills but merely postpones them until the emergency order is lifted.

Utilities operated by cities, parishes and non-profit water boards are regulated by local officials and thus are exempt from LPSC jurisdiction and the Governor's order. However, some local governments, including Baton Rouge and New Orleans, are ending cutoffs for non-payment as well during the virus crisis. Customers of these utilities should contact local officials for more information.

The LPSC order stopping utility disconnections can be found on the websites of Governor Edwards (gov.la.gov) and the Louisiana PSC (lpsc.la.gov).

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