MPSC Outlines Steps to Ensure Utility Protections, Assistance for Vulnerable Households Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Michigan Public Service Commission today called on energy providers to undertake a number of steps to ensure customers have access to safe, reliable energy at reasonable rates during the coronavirus emergency that's brought so much uncertainty to personal financial situations and the national and state economies. The Commission also acknowledged the response by telecommunications providers to improve network access and protect customers during this crisis.

Individuals and businesses face extraordinary difficulties now and over the long term amid unprecedented business shutdowns and unparalleled unemployment filings. The MPSC's order:

- Directs energy providers to affirm the availability of customer protections for vulnerable households and to address affordability and payment flexibility options for customers;
- Requires energy providers to report additional data on households without gas or electric service and steps to restore service to occupied households;
- Instructs energy providers to coordinate with MPSC staff and stakeholders to develop continuity plans for meeting energy and demand saving targets even as social distancing limits the ability of workers to interact with customers through energy waste reduction and demand response programs;
- Directs utilities to track bad debt, or uncollectible expenses, for future monitoring; and,
- Invites comments from interested persons on the accounting of COVID-related expenses by utilities, regulatory compliance deadlines, and prioritization of regular MPSC activities during this emergency.

The order gives MPSC-jurisdictional energy utilities until April 30 to consult with MPSC staff on their practices and plans to improve affordability for customers, including payment flexibility, support of energy assistance programs and customer education and outreach. This includes all customer classes, with an emphasis on those impacted by government orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and those financially or medically impacted by the virus. Energy providers also must affirm by April 20 that minimum protections are in place, including:

- Suspending disconnections for Michigan's most vulnerable populations, low-income and senior customers, through June 1, and waiving late fees for eligible low-income customers receiving energy assistance.

- Allowing for customers exposed to, infected by or quarantined because of COVID-19 to be eligible for a 30-day medical hold to avoid a disconnection of service.
- Waiving deposits and reconnection fees for low-income customers, seniors and customers experiencing financial hardship related to COVID-19 and seeking restoration of electric or gas service.
- Extending access to and availability of flexible payment plans to customers financially impacted by COVID-19, and providing customer assistance personnel with the resources necessary to connect customers to available financial assistance and social service agencies.

The order requires additional steps to be taken by utilities to address households with gas or electric service that was disconnected prior to COVID-19 crisis, including more frequent and detailed reporting of the number of customers without service and efforts being made to reconnect customers.

“While we’re all being asked to sacrifice to save lives during this pandemic, Michiganders shouldn’t have to worry that the loss of a job or drop in income might lead to their gas or electricity being shut off,” said Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. “We will get through this crisis by making sure we are looking out for each other.”

With respect to the customer protections outlined above, the Commission’s order applies to the investor-owned utilities subject to regulation by the MPSC under Michigan law; these companies provide service to the vast majority of households and businesses in the state. The Commission directed rural electric and gas cooperatives to provide affirmation of their shutoff protections, given the connection to the cooperatives’ provision of safe, reliable service under the Commission’s rules. Municipally owned utilities are not subject to MPSC jurisdiction but have been coordinating closely with the MPSC and other state officials during this crisis and are providing similar protections to their customers.

The MPSC has, under law, a more limited role in the regulatory realm of service quality and customer protections for telecommunications and communications services such as landline and wireless phone, video/cable, and internet/broadband. The Commission has been encouraged that many Michigan providers have signed onto the Federal Communications Commission Chairman’s Keep Americans Connected pledge to not terminate service and waive late fees amid the pandemic. The Commission maintains its important statutory responsibilities overseeing vital telecommunications services including handling complaints related to basic local exchange phone service and video franchise/cable providers, enforcement of Telephone Relay Service (TRS) accessibility requirements for the deaf, deafblind, hard of hearing, or speech impaired, ensuring reliable access to 911 and emergency services, and enforcement of MISS DIG. In addition, the Commission continues to monitor the actions of the FCC and Universal Service Administrative Company as they temporarily relax consumer and provider requirements to allow consumers to maintain vital connections to Lifeline phone and broadband services during this pandemic.

“Ensuring customers have access to safe, reliable and reasonably priced energy and telecommunications services is vital, but even more so during a pandemic of this nature,” said MPSC Chairman Sally Talberg. “The Public Service Commission is taking a comprehensive approach to help customers disrupted by this crisis while ensuring utilities can focus their efforts on maintaining critical infrastructure and keeping their workers and the public safe.”

The additional actions are among multiple steps the MPSC has taken during the coronavirus emergency to ensure safe, reliable service amid the difficulties that business shutdowns, illness, stay-home protective orders and social distancing are imposing on industry and everyday Michiganders.

Among **steps previously taken**, the MPSC, the State of Michigan and energy utilities across the state have:

- Agreed to extended customer protections, including pausing shutoffs, restoring service and adding flexible payment options for vulnerable customers.
- Streamlined eligibility screening for energy assistance funding.
- Coordinated with local governments and other underground facility owners on MISS DIG and damage protection practices.
- Enacted waivers of requirements in licensing, permitting and other areas to ensure speedy and more nimble response to restrictions impacting energy, telecommunications, emergency response and other critical industries and their needs amid the pandemic.

Information around this outbreak is changing rapidly. The latest information is available at **www.michigan.gov/coronavirus** and **www.cdc.gov/coronavirus**.

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