

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

April 15, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
U.S. Capitol, H-232
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
U.S. Capitol, S-230
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
U.S. Capitol, H-204
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
U.S. Capitol, S-221
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McConnell, Leader McCarthy and Leader Schumer,

We write to request that Congress protects the most vulnerable Americans from the danger and insecurity that results from utility shut-offs by putting a nationwide moratorium on essential utility service disconnections until the COVID-19 pandemic threat has passed and the country's economy has stabilized as part of the next COVID-19 package. A moratorium would provide important temporary relief during this COVID-19 crisis, but as we seek to recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to invest in addressing the systemic issues driving unjust utility burdens across America.

While the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act included important paycheck and eviction protection measures, it failed to ensure that families will continue to have access to the basic utility services—including electricity, water and wastewater, heating, telecommunications, and internet—essential to survive during this health crisis.

Utility services are especially critical for public health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Water service ensures that Americans can handwash and disinfect surfaces necessary to slow and stop the coronavirus outbreak. Electricity is necessary for families to turn on the lights and have refrigerated food to eat. Internet access is essential for many employees to be able to work from home and for children who are out of school to access educational resources. Millions working service jobs on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic are facing disconnection.

Utility insecurity is felt by low-wealth Americans, rural and tribal communities and people of color. Newly unemployed Americans are facing disconnection because of loss of income. Vulnerable elderly populations need electricity to run life-saving medical equipment, keep medications refrigerated, and keep their homes at livable temperatures. These are the communities that need congressional protections the most.

We applaud the many utilities and that have taken voluntary steps to prevent disconnections during this crisis. Many states have also issued orders to keep utility services connected.

For all of us to get through this together we need to have a national policy with clear standards that utilities can follow, and ensure that no family is left behind in the patchwork of policies. The federal government should provide utilities with support for operations as well as customers, especially in light of declining utility revenues caused by unemployment, small business shutdowns, and rising poverty.

Congress cannot simply give low-wealth Americans a short-term reprieve on disconnections without ensuring them adequate time to recover from job losses and other coronavirus impacts. Families should not be condemned to a growing and unpayable utility burden that comes due at the end of this national emergency. We must ensure that these essential services are maintained when the COVID-19 pandemic threat has passed and the country's economy has stabilized.

We ask that the nationwide moratorium last for at least six months beyond the end date of the national state of emergency to allow for a sufficient grace period for families to recover from unemployment and other coronavirus-related impacts. All families whose services have already been cut off should be safely reconnected. All late fees and bill payments for low-wealth families should be forgiven through the end of the grace period. Congress must provide federal support to make this possible.

The COVID-19 outbreak has highlighted the systemic problems of poverty and utility insecurity in the United States and its disparate impact on low-wealth communities and communities of color. When Congress enacts legislation to speed the economic recovery of our country, it should prioritize permanently increasing the economic security for low-wealth individuals. Priority should go to building infrastructure to support distributed renewable energy, safe water systems, and broadband access in rural areas.

Now is the time for our country to provide relief for the communities that are being most harmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to working with you to find a workable solution for all families in this difficult time.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

Peter DeFazio
Member of Congress

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Brenda L. Lawrence
Member of Congress

Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator

Ro Khanna
Member of Congress

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

Patty Murray
United States Senator

David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress

Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

Albio Sires
Member of Congress

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress

Ron Wyden
United States Senator

Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

Gwen Moore
Member of Congress

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

Mike Doyle
Member of Congress

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress

Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

Jerry McNerney
Member of Congress

Jahana Hayes
Member of Congress

Jerrold Nadler
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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
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Marcia L. Fudge
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Betty McCollum
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Juan Vargas
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Suzanne Bonamici
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Ruben Gallego
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Bonnie Watson Coleman
Member of Congress

Mike Quigley
Member of Congress

Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress

Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress

Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress

Steve Cohen
Member of Congress

Gilbert R. Cisneros, Jr.
Member of Congress

Grace F. Napolitano
Member of Congress

Joseph P. Kennedy III
Member of Congress

Tim Ryan
Member of Congress

Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress

Harley Rouda
Member of Congress

John B. Larson
Member of Congress

Wm. Lacy Clay
Member of Congress

Frederica S. Wilson
Member of Congress

Chris Pappas
Member of Congress

Julia Brownley
Member of Congress

Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress

Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.
Member of Congress

Nydia M. Velázquez
Member of Congress

Dan Kildee
Member of Congress

Alma S. Adams, Ph.D.
Member of Congress

Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress

Mike Thompson
Member of Congress

Stephen E. Lynch
Member of Congress

Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee
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Karen Bass
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Bennie G. Thompson
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Jennifer Wexton
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Danny K. Davis
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Matthew Cartwright
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Bill Foster
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Thomas R. Suozzi
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Marcy Kaptur
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Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress

Andy Levin
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Judy Chu
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Cedric L. Richmond
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Joyce Beatty
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Sean Casten
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