

Chairperson Margaret Curran
Rhode Island Public Utilities Commission
89 Jefferson Blvd
Warwick, RI 02888

November 16, 2017

RE: Docket 1725

George Wiley Center's request for Emergency Regulations to allow affordable utility restoration

Dear Honorable Commissioners,

Thank you for considering the George Wiley Center's request to implement emergency regulations for affordable utility restoration. As you are surely aware, there are still many in Rhode Island who are currently shut off from necessary gas and electric utility service. While the recent wind storm causing utility outages to much of Rhode Island made the news, and subsequent reports stated that "all" have had power restored, we know this is not the case. We hope you will recognize the realities of all the Rhode Islanders who the George Wiley Center hears from every day, and for each person we talk to the many more we never hear from, who are still struggling without utility service after having been shut off due to unaffordable bills.

This economic storm hits homes hard, leaving those who are unable to afford utility restoration the difficult experience of weeks and even months trying to survive without services many of us take for granted. Utilities are a basic need all year long, and as you may know, much of the George Wiley Center's organizing and advocacy over the past decades has focused on this very issue, to urge our state policy to reflect this understanding of utilities as a basic need. The issue before you now is just one part of deeper flaws in our current system, where necessary utilities are simply unaffordable for thousands of households. As we look into longer term solutions, there is an urgency to act now with the winter setting in, when the need for heat and light is not a mere convenience but vital for survival.

We urge the Commissioners to weigh the benefits to community health, to allow for more affordable 10% down payments for all utility consumers, to last through the end of the year, or longer, and to not penalize those facing extended economic hardship by requiring accounts to have lower outstanding balances than the previous year. Indeed this is an emergency when so many are still without needed electric service. During this past month of October, 2017, 2,510 physical electric terminations were imposed, 51 of those on "protected" households, and as of October 31st, 1,410 electric accounts still have not been restored after terminations occurring since April 16th. No electric service means no light, no heat, no communication, no refrigeration, no food preparation, no hot water, no medicine storage, no medical equipment function, no computers for work or school, and life without all the other necessities electricity allows. Indeed this is an emergency when so many are still without needed gas service. During this past month of October, 2017, 967 physical gas terminations were imposed, 32 of those to "protected" households, and as of October 31st, 1,935 gas accounts still have not been restored after terminations occurring since April 16th. No gas service means no heat, no hot water, no food preparation, and lack of other daily essentials.

We hope the Commission finds these numbers disturbing and acts to afford relief for our neighbors and families across the state. In addition to implementing this important regulation, we also encourage the Commission to request that National Grid inform all consumers who are currently without service that this emergency rule is in place. In past years the George Wiley Center and other already strained social service agencies have scrambled to inform people of this very helpful opportunity for more affordable utility restoration. Unfortunately, as it only lasts for a short period time, and because we lack contact information for all who are currently shut off, we know that many are able to benefit but many others are not. Since National Grid does have access to all the account information of their utility customers who are currently shut off, and the company is set up to routinely send out mailings and notifications, any offer to allow affordable utility restoration could best be communicated by the company directly to the consumers. In addition to mailed notifications, which would be our preference, perhaps some other form of mass communication such as notice on the website or other public advertisements could also be helpful. Of course most importantly would be the Commission's ruling on more affordable down payments for service restoration, but additionally we know that for these rules to have the greatest impact it will require adequate outreach to those most impacted.

Thank you again for your deliberation and leadership, to assist struggling households in regaining access to basic needs and a dignified quality of life. We look forward to finding ways and future policies that will more broadly address the shut-off crisis in Rhode Island, to make the shut-off crisis a thing of the past as we move toward utility systems that are sustainable and affordable for both people and planet.

Sincerely,

Camilo Viveiros, Coordinator
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and

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Many Rhode Islanders have expressed support for the George Wiley Center's proposal and have submitted letters directly to the Commission. Below are several dozen personal testimonies in support of affordable utility restoration, including comments from Rhode Islanders currently struggling with no service as a result of utility termination. Thank you for considering these comments and for prioritizing the well-being of all in our community.

Supporters of the George Wiley Center's proposal for affordable utility restoration:

As the weather gets colder, it is only fair that the PUC ensure that households across Rhode Island have access to utilities and heat. This is a basic human need. I support utility restoration because members of our communities face a host of negative consequences due to utility shutoffs. These shutoffs penalize the poorest and most marginalized people in Rhode Island.

Anna Kastner

I am a single mother of two children. One is in community college, one in 1st grade. Both girls are amazing. In 2011, I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, soon after, fibromyalgia. Over the past five years it has become increasingly difficult for me to work at a steady pace to provide income for my household. In December of 2016, my doctors took me out of work totally. I pretty much had zero income. I was put on the AMP plan for my utilities. \$105.00 monthly for electric and \$133.00 monthly for gas. A great plan if you had the income to pay it. My income? \$141.00 a week from TDI. I tried desperately to pay National Grid what I could, as my bills are so far behind. I don't think they understand the concept of having to pick and choose what you have to pay. I also have car insurance, household needs and two children I have to care for alone on no income. When I defaulted on the AMP program, I was asked for a down payment of over \$700.00 to avoid shut-off. The customer service agents at National Grid are on a power trip (no pun intended) and feel good when they tell you the large sum of money you need to put down "or else". It's a shame that a BASIC need like lights and heat costs so much and people like myself that are disabled and can't afford it are threatened with shut-offs all the time. Right now I have handicap protection on my account but that only goes so far. Fluctuations in temperature adversely affect my multiple sclerosis, but no one really cares about that. They just want their money. I believe utilities should be affordable for everyone. Those of us who have been dealt a hand we have no control over shouldn't be punished because we cannot afford to pay.

Sincerely,

Susanna Sharkey
East Providence

People deserve to have a warm home during the winter, especially children.

Rory O'Brien

I am writing to ask the PUC to restore utilities to the thousands of Rhode Islanders who are currently without utilities. A good way to do this is to adopt the Percentage Income Payment Plan (PIPP), endorsed by the George Wiley Center. Rhode Island has successfully used this plan in the past.

Utilities are a basic need for all Rhode Islanders. This is the reason that I support the PIPP.

Thanks,
Charlie

Charles Feldman
Providence Resident and Voter

To whom it may concern:

I am writing in support of the George Wiley proposal to the PUC (Public Utilities Commission) to enact emergency rules for affordable utility restoration.

Affordable payment agreements and affordable utilities are really an issue of inequity. We have almost no affordable housing in southern RI. Many of the patients at the Wood River Health Services where I work are trying to survive in housing they can barely afford in the warmer months and cannot afford once they need to pay higher heating costs and higher electrical due to shorter daylight hours. If the state would build more subsidized housing and/or issue more vouchers, utility shutoffs would not be the major issue they are today.

I urge you to enact the George Wiley Center proposal to help our most needy citizens. Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,
Linnea Johnson
Community Resource Specialist, Certified Navigator
Wood River Health Services Inc.
Hope Valley, RI

Winter is just around the corner, and even fall in Rhode Island is no joke. Temperatures are already getting into the 20s at night. People who are huddling for warmth are unlikely to be earning what they need to pay to get their heat restored. With a shutoff moratorium in place, clearly there is some recognition by the PUC that having heat in winter is necessary for survival. Not restoring the service of people who had the misfortune of having their power shut off before the benefit of the moratorium is unnecessarily punitive.

Matt Henry

Our utilities should be wholly decommodified and considered basic human needs, to which every person has a right. In the meantime, if we are to be any kind of civilized society whatsoever, we must ensure that the barbaric practice of shutting off someone's heat in the cold is eliminated.

Rob Shaw

I believe that the PUC should enact emergency rules for utility restoration because if someone shouldn't get their utilities shut off during the winter, they shouldn't have their utilities unable to be restored during the winter. The problem is the same: poor people who can't afford rising energy prices not being able to heat their houses and being placed in physical danger. LET THEM HAVE HEAT.

Michael Gsovski

As cold weather grows worse, utility shutoffs become even more dire circumstances for members of the community to deal with. Lack of heat and hot water is an impediment to health and safety, not to mention basic comfort, especially for people with disabilities, the elderly, and children. Utilities are a basic human right and not a for-profit commodity.

Sarah Thomas

Dear Public Utilities Commission:

I am writing you today to support the George Wiley Center's proposal for affordable utility restoration.

As a landlord, I see the struggle many of my tenants have to afford their utility bills each month. Many of them – if not all – live literally paycheck to paycheck. Frankly, for many of them, making it paycheck to paycheck is often unattainable. My tenants are hard-working citizens of Rhode Island, often taking second and third jobs to pay their bills. Far too often I have visited my tenants, only to find them living without heat or electricity, waiting for a paycheck so they can get the lights and heat turned back on.

The George Wiley has submitted a proposal to you – I urge you to enact emergency rules for affordable utility restoration. The utility company routinely demands high down payments for utility restoration, amounts that are unattainable for many struggling households. With winter coming, this issue is clearly in the interest of community health – lives may depend on it. Please support the Wiley Center's proposal for a 10% payment to be allowed for utility consumers (who are currently shut off) to get their heat and light turned back on.

Frankly, landlords should support this too, as often tenants must pay a large portion of their monthly income to get the lights/heat turned back on. This often results in delayed rent payments. The 10% payment solution would help.

As you must know, Rhode Island already has a shockingly high shut-off rate. Each year approximately 20,000 households are put through the trauma of utility termination due to unaffordable bills. This means surviving without access to heat, light, electricity, hot water, refrigeration, and all the other necessities of daily life. Imagine a child trying to do homework without lights or heat. Imagine a child having to shower or bathe without hot water.

Please take action -- and support the 10% payment allowance. Thank you.

Gerry Willis
Dr. Gerry Willis, Salve Regina University

I strongly support the efforts of the Wiley Center to restore utility services to all in RI who have had service shut off.

Bernice Lott, URI, emeritus professor, URI

Testimony as told to the George Wiley Center on November 15th, 2017, from a Rhode Islander who has been shut off from gas service since April and can't afford the high down payment demanded by National Grid:

“My situation right now, I don’t have a job. They [National Grid] told me with \$1,300 we can make an agreement to turn the gas back on. When I had a job I paid it every month. But I haven’t had a job for about six months. I’m looking, tomorrow I’m going to fill out a couple of applications. I live alone. I’ve been shut off since April, 7 months. In the summer I didn’t need the gas as much, but I did have only cold showers. But now it’s very important, it’s getting cold, and it’s not even winter yet. Ten percent would be about \$300, which could be possible to pay, if I find a job. Please, I hope you will decide this, so I can have help to pay my bill.”

Jose Rodrigues, Central Falls

Heat and electricity are basic needs, and it is absurd that anyone should not have them in a society that can afford to provide these services. Heat is obviously most needed during the winter -- some people's lives may be put at risk without it.

Daniel Crowell

Please accept these comments at testimony in support of affordable utility restoration for all Rhode Islanders, such as that proposed by the George Wiley Center. "Public" utilities should exist for the basic survival and well-being of the public (human beings), not only the profits of those who own and sell them. Utility shut-offs present a hardship that threatens both survival and well-being of those who experience them. Although I currently have the means to pay my utility bill, as a senior who faces living on Social Security alone in the near future, I can foresee the day when I have to choose between food and heat, medical care and electricity. I urge you to step up to the moral imperative to protect me and the rest of the "public", which is in fact the reason your commission is empowered to exist.

Thank you for your service,

Shana L. Klinger, Pawtucket

Dear Public Utilities Commission,

I am writing today to encourage the Public Utilities Commission to enable affordable utility service restoration for all Rhode Islanders currently shut off from gas or electric service. Access to affordable

utilities is a basic human need, yet thousands in our state are currently without access to utilities due to economic inequality. This is a situation which is unacceptable.

I have suffered more than one winter here in Rhode Island without access to heat due solely to the fact that the cost was financially beyond my means. I know firsthand that living without heat makes life a grueling experience. In my experience, it exacerbated anxiety, depression, and physical illnesses such as the common cold and flu. It was not a life that any Rhode Islander should have to suffer needlessly.

The PUC has the power to affect this situation in a positive way. Please consider the health and the safety of those affected by shut offs by voting yes on the George Wiley Center's proposal for Emergency Rules to restore utility service before the winter season. Please remove barriers for people facing extended economic insecurity, such as the stipulation that affordable down payments are available only to those whose outstanding balance is lower than in previous years. Allow for a 10% down payment on outstanding balances. Please offer these regulations to all Rhode Islanders, both protected and standard customers. I ask that you implement these emergency regulations immediately, as the cold season is already upon us.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter which affects us all.

Kyle Stumpe, Providence

It isn't right for people's utilities to be shut off because they cannot pay. This is not what a just society does. A just society does not punish its least advantaged -- and I know that we can do better than this. Each person has inherent dignity, and for a basic need such as this to be taken away for the sake of money and profit is nothing short of criminal.

Michael Barsana

People should not be deprived of their essential utilities simply because they missed an arbitrary deadline. No one should have to go through the winter without heat or electricity. Everyone who has had their utilities turned off should have them restored for the winter.

James Vita

Dear Friends,

I'm writing to support the George Wiley Center and its work to protect community health - specifically I ask you to allow payments of 10% for all utility consumers who are currently shut off, to ensure heat,

light, and many other basic needs during this critical period before the onset of winter. We've already had an early and brutal introduction to winter!

These are people who have a home, who are not vagrants, but who have managed to secure a roof over their heads and then to qualify for utility accounts. Hard times come to most of us - a number of my "affluent" East Side neighbors lost power for a full week, on the East Side; they were fortunate to have generators and family nearby - and as a friend in Florida described his hurricane experience "Eleven days and \$11,000 of gas for my generator." And he appreciated how lucky he was.

Let there be light ... good fortune, and warmth for all! Let's not leave it only to luck.

Thank you for your consideration.

Connie Worthington, Providence

National Grid has already accepted the practice of a shut-off moratorium during our coldest months when people are most vulnerable. This obvious ethical standard should be applied just the same towards Rhode Islanders who have already had their heat and electricity shut off.

Mark Pryzgoda

Nobody should have to freeze in their home for lack of money.

Ryan Lawrence

I work at the Department of Human Services and every day at work I see people struggling to live even with the State and Federal government's help. One of the common denominators among these people is their inability to pay their utility bills. Not only do these people have trouble feeding themselves and their families they have to worry about freezing to death. As winter approaches the inhumanity of denying people their basic needs in favor of profit becomes ever more apparent.

Colin Morgan

As a citizen, neighbor, business owner, and stakeholder in the health, stability, and happiness of the other people of Rhode Island I urge the PUC to consider and adopt the recommendations made by the George Wiley Center regarding utility service shutoffs and restoration.

Let's face it, when electrical shutoffs due to hurricanes or other storms, happen we all get a taste of how much more difficult life is when our basic needs for light, warmth, and food are impacted. Now imagine that this isn't just a temporary inconvenience caused by a weather event beyond our control, but something that is acted out upon some of our most marginalized neighbors. Poverty, like a force of nature, wreaks havoc on people's lives. But we shouldn't wait for a disaster to strike before we extend the help we can for people who need it most.

If the PUC, acting on behalf of the public, all of the public, were to bring back a lower deposit amount, proportional to the utility account holder's income, this would help people meet their basic needs. The timing for this is as crucial as we approach winter, as summer, as needs for heating or cooling, and retarding food spoilage, and having light are basic needs year round.

Thank you,

Cris Monteiro, Providence Community Acupuncture

No one should freeze during the winter because of the size of their bank account.

Daniel Denvir

Electricity shutoffs disproportionately affect working people, young families, and the elderly. Emergency utility restoration would protect them.

Bruce Borowsky

Testimony as told to the George Wiley Center, from a Rhode Islander who is still shut off as of November 16th, 2017 having been without service for 3 weeks because she can't afford the 25% down requested by the company:

"I could have had my heat on if they let me pay 10 or 15%. It's freezing, I try to cover myself with blankets to keep warm. I can't use my gas for heat even though my gas isn't shut off because my electric needs to be on in order for my gas to be used for heat.

We have been trying to get our electric back on every day from 8am to 5pm. We haven't had our electricity on throughout the whole storm and different holidays. My godson has gotten triggered from the emotional stress of this, he is eight years old. He can't stay with us and he tells me things to make me feel better, he tells me like he would sue these mean people.

It has torn my family apart. My son needs breathing treatment and our Serious Ill and Handicapped forms are on file with National Grid but National Grid has still refused to allow us to pay an affordable way to get my heat on.

These people have no hearts."

Melissa Richard

Electricity, water, and heat are basic human needs that no person should be deprived of due to corporate desire for profits. No one should be made to freeze or go without power because of their financial situation. We are more than capable of providing power and heat to all in our state, so there's no excuse to leave anyone shut off as winter starts!

Daniel Kittridge

Because utilities are a basic human right.

Alex Loehrer