

COVID-19: Utility Related Recommendations

The services provided by utilities are part of our daily routine. Arizonans use electricity for many purposes including to keep our food and medicine refrigerated, wash and dry our clothes, and charge our computers and phones. Arizonans use gas to cook and warm our homes. Arizonans use water to drink and bathe. Arizonans used telecommunications for work and school and to communicate with family and friends.

For years, many Arizonans have struggled to pay utility bills. Due to the public health warnings associated with COVID-19, many more Arizonans are working from home and taking classes online. Without at least temporary relief and clear communication, Arizonans are likely to face even greater challenges paying utility bills for the foreseeable future.

Although the Arizona Corporation Commission, utilities and non-profits cannot fix the crisis on our own, we can help alleviate at least some of the angst of ratepayers through mitigating reliability, safety and financial concerns and by visibly and frequently communicating the measures underway to protect consumers.

Below please find recommendations for the Arizona Corporation Commission, utilities and consumers and links to recent utility policies. Wildfire and the Arizona PIRG Education Fund are pleased that a number of utilities have proactively instituted policies to help consumers during this challenging time and urge others to follow suit.

Recommendations for the Arizona Corporation Commission

- Require a temporary disconnection moratorium for electric, gas, water, sewer and telecommunication utility services.
- Require a temporary moratorium on utility deposits and late fees.
- Require a minimum of an automatic six-month payment plan, with the ability to extend, for those falling behind on their utility bills.
- Require utilities to provide the opportunity for customers to switch rate plans with no penalties.
- Require utilities to provide customers, upon request, with information about the least-cost rate plan for their household due to estimated changes in usage.
- Require telecommunication companies to take and implement the “Keep Americans Connected Pledge”.

- Require utilities to clearly, consistently and directly educate ratepayers about potential impacts of Time-of-Use and Demand Rate plans and the ability to switch rate plans with no penalties. Communication to ratepayers should happen over multiple channels including traditional and social media, bill statements, homepage of website, email and text messages (where consent has been granted) and in multiple languages including English and Spanish.
- Require utilities to actively promote financial assistance that is available to help pay utility bills.
- Require utilities to routinely provide updates to the docket stemming from COVID-19. Updates should include if there is a significant number of customers switching rate plans, a significant increase in the number of customer requests or other customer communication and status of arrearages and financial support available compared to the previous year.
- Protect Commission employees and the public through requiring non-essential personnel to work from home and by setting up video conferencing for meetings, workshops and other Commission business.

Recommendations for Utilities

- Implement a temporary disconnection moratorium.
- Implement a temporary moratorium on utility deposits and late fees.
- Implement a minimum of an automatic six-month payment plan, with the ability to extend, for those falling behind on their utility bills.
- Provide the opportunity for customers to switch rate plans with no penalties. Ensure a customer can reach customer service 24-7.
- Provide customers, upon request, with information about the least-cost rate plan for their household due to estimated changes in usage.
- If applicable, take the “Keep Americans Protected Pledge”.
- Clearly, consistently and directly educate ratepayers about potential impacts of Time-of-Use and Demand Rate plans and the ability to switch rate plans with no penalties. Communication to ratepayers should happen over multiple channels including traditional and social media, bill statements, homepage of website, email and text messages (where consent has been granted) and in multiple languages including English and Spanish.
- Actively promote financial assistance that is available to help pay utility bills.
- Routinely provide updates to the docket stemming from COVID-19. Updates should include if there is a significant number of customers switching rate plans, a significant increase in the number of customer requests or other customer communication and status of arrearages and financial support available compared to the previous year.
- Protect employees and the public through requiring non-essential personnel to work from home and by setting up video conferencing for meetings and other utility business.

Recommendations for Consumers

- Check with your utility on potential changes to their policies related to payments. See below for a list of recent utility policy changes.
- Identify potential changes in your utility usage. For instance, if there are now members of your household working from home or if there is a child or children taking classes from home a Time-of-Use Plan or Demand Rate plan may no longer be the least-cost option for your household.
- Contact your utility to explore the least-cost rate plan for your household due to estimated changes in usage. If you deem best, switch plans now with the potential to further adjust at the appropriate time (make sure your utility will allow an additional switch without penalty).
- If you are behind or anticipate having a hard time paying your electric bill, contact your utility as soon as possible to learn about financial assistance that may exist for your household. Ask your utility to set you up on a payment plan of six months, with the ability to extend if circumstances are warranted.
- For a list of organizations providing utility assistance, visit <https://wildfireaz.org/find-help/energy-assistance/>, email info@wildfireaz.org or call Wildfire at (602)604-0640.
- Contact the Arizona Corporation Commission at (602)542-4251 or file a complaint at <https://bit.ly/2J9pmbN> if you have a concern that your utility isn't addressing.
- Be on the lookout for utility and other scams. If in doubt, it is best to call your utility directly to ask questions or to make a payment. See the PIRG Education Fund's tips on [Identifying Coronavirus Phishing Scams: How to protect your confidential information](#).
- Forward information directly from the utilities to family, friends, neighbors and colleagues.
- Follow our organizations for updates on COVID-19 and other consumer related issues. Facebook.com/StopPovertyBeforeItStarts and sign up for emails: info@wildfireaz.org Facebook.com/ArizonaPIRG and sign up for emails: <https://bit.ly/2wwaIZs>

Recent Utility Policy Changes & Statements

Please note the list below is not comprehensive and is subject to change. More information, particularly on what water companies in Arizona are doing, can be found at: <https://bit.ly/2WMsYZt> If you have a specific question or concern, please contact us through the information provided below. We also recommend you frequently check the website of the company for any policy updates.

Electric

[Arizona Public Service](#)

[Salt River Project](#)

[Tucson Electric Power](#)

[UNS Energy Services](#)

[Grand Canyon State Electric Cooperative Association](#)

Gas
[Southwest Gas](#)
[UNS Energy Services](#)

Water
[Arizona Water Company](#)
[EPCOR](#)
[Global Water](#)

Telecommunications
[CenturyLink](#)
[Cox](#)

Wildfire and the Arizona PIRG Education Fund recognize that many in our state are experiencing anxiety right now and that the COVID-19 situation is projected to get worse before it gets better. We appreciate the team effort underway in our state to provide updates and resources to Arizonans. We urge Governor Ducey and members of the Arizona legislature to provide funding for folks struggling to pay their utility bills during this time.

For More Information:

Cynthia Zwick
Executive Director, Wildfire
czwick@wildfireaz.org

Diane E. Brown
Executive Director, Arizona PIRG Education Fund
dbrown@arizonapirg.org