

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 3, 2021

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader Schumer,

The tragedy in Texas and across the United States as climate-induced extreme cold killed dozens of Americans and left millions more without heat and water is a stark reminder of why these services are essential for Americans. Unfortunately, as our country continues to struggle with the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic tens of thousands of Americans have already had services disconnected because they cannot pay their mounting bills and millions more are at risk of disconnection. We applaud President Biden for including \$5 billion for electricity and water assistance in his coronavirus plan, but more must be done to ensure that families continue to have access to these essential services.

While always essential, utility services are especially critical for public health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent working paper from Duke University's Nicholas Institute found that had federal policies that ended utilities shutoffs been in place from March through November 2020, COVID-19 infections could have been reduced by 8.7% and COVID-19 deaths could have been reduced by 14.8%. Water service ensures that Americans can hand wash in order to slow the coronavirus outbreak. Energy is necessary for families to heat their homes and turn on the lights, while allowing households to avoid congregating which can lead to the spread of COVID-19. Internet access is essential for people to schedule COVID-19 vaccination appointments and access vital public health information, as well as allow adults to work from home and children to learn safely from distance learning. Vulnerable elderly populations need electricity to run life-saving medical equipment, keep medications refrigerated, and keep their homes at livable temperatures.

Newly unemployed Americans are facing disconnection because of loss of income, and many Americans are having to choose between putting food on the table or keeping their heat and water. We know that too often deferred utility payments is the start of a debt spiral that results in them at risk of losing their housing. Utility insecurity is disproportionately felt by low-wealth Americans, rural and tribal communities, and people of color. These are the communities that need congressional protections the most.

No utility wants to disconnect their customers and we applaud the many utilities that have taken voluntary steps to prevent disconnections during this crisis. Many states also issued orders to keep utility services connected, but most of these orders have now expired even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage. For all of us to get through this together we need to have a national policy that helps to ensure that no family is left behind in a patchwork of policies.

The COVID-19 outbreak, as well as the tragedy last week, have 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. 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 to ensure that all families maintain their essential services in this difficult time.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jeffrey A. Merkley
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator

/s/ Tammy Duckworth
Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

/s/ Cory A. Booker
Cory Booker
United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/ Ron Wyden
Ron Wyden
United States Senator

/s/ Alex Padilla
Alex Padilla
United States Senator

/s/ Richard J. Durbin
Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator

/s/ Edward J. Markey
Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

/s/ Richard Blumenthal
Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ Elizabeth Warren
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

/s/ Dianne Feinstein
Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator

/s/ Bernard Sanders
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

/s/ Kirsten Gillibrand
Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

/s/ Raphael Warnock
Raphael Warnock
United States Senator