

September 15, 2021

VIA E-FILING

Mr. Will Seuffert
Executive Secretary
Minnesota Public Utilities Commission
121 East Seventh Place, Suite 350
St. Paul, MN 55101-2147

RE: In the Matter of an Inquiry into Actions by Electric and Natural Gas Utilities in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic Emergency
Docket No. E,G-999/CI-20-375
UTILITY COMMENTS

Dear Mr. Seuffert:

The undersigned utilities (“Utilities”) respectfully file these comments in response to the September 9, 2021 Notice of Comment Period (“Notice”) issued by the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (“Commission”), with an expedited comment closing date of September 15, 2021. The specific topic for comments is:

Should the Commission approve the request by the MHFA to prohibit utility disconnections until April 30, 2022, for customers with a pending application for RentHelpMN?

On September 9, 2021, Minnesota Housing filed a letter in the above-referenced docket requesting a change to the Commission’s May 26, 2021 Order, specifically Order Point 5, which states:

The Commission prohibits disconnections of customers with past due balances who have a pending application or have been deemed eligible for LIHEAP/EAP assistance for the duration of the transition period (April 30, 2022).

It is crucial to consider the context under which Order Point 5 was developed, considered, and ultimately adopted in the Commission’s Order. In these comments, the Utilities discuss both the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (“LIHEAP”) and RentHelpMN as the Commission considers this request by Minnesota Housing.

Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program

LIHEAP is a long-standing energy assistance program that is funded annually through federal dollars. Utilities and the Department of Commerce, Energy Assistance Program Division (“Department”) have well-established processes for LIHEAP administration. The Department has worked closely with utilities before, during, and as part of transition plans to ensure there are timely LIHEAP provision updates shared and to establish a process through an online software system called Electronic Household Energy Automated Technology (“eHEAT”) to specifically

share application statuses. The eHEAT system helps Service Providers and Energy Vendors manage data and streamline program functions.

A network of Community Action Agencies, Counties, not-for-profit organizations, and tribal governments are LIHEAP Service Providers. Utilities are considered Energy Vendors. An annual agreement is established between Service Providers and Energy Vendors to ensure the terms of sharing confidential customer information are clear. The eHEAT system referenced above provides transparency regarding LIHEAP and provides a secure platform for sharing customer utility information as well as LIHEAP status information. While eHEAT has historically been used primarily to receive payments, return refunds, and provide energy consumption information, this system infrastructure has been a critical component for meeting the commitments of Order Point 5. Utilities have updated their internal systems and processes to include LIHEAP application status, which is readily obtained through modified eHEAT exports that can be used to update utility billing systems or by directly accessing eHEAT. In addition, Service Providers routinely communicate with utilities in the processing of LIHEAP applications, oftentimes calling to guarantee funds for those who have arrears balances and may be facing disconnection. Some, but not all, utilities also offer an agency portal that provides another channel for accessing and sharing information specific to that utility, including requests to pause collection activity.

Importantly, collaborative outreach efforts between the Department and the Utilities have been amplified in light of the American Rescue Plan Act, where additional LIHEAP funding was established. Utilities and the Department meet weekly to discuss LIHEAP funding and overall application status, planned or anticipated outreach, and utility arrears outlooks as transition plans have been put in place.

Another important consideration for transition plans was the potential establishment of and/or referral to utility affordability programs, most of which are based on LIHEAP approval as a qualification step. As such, it has been a shared priority by Utilities and the Department to maximize LIHEAP applications to connect customers to not only the direct benefits of LIHEAP, but also other program resources and protections that may be available, including those outlined in Order Point 5.

It is with all of these considerations in mind, that Order Point 5 was determined feasible and effectuated quickly and effectively for LIHEAP.

Minnesota Housing RentHelpMN

While the Utilities appreciate that RentHelpMN is a potential resource for customers and do not question the need, merits or benefits of the program, there are many program and administrative details that are not well-known or established, making its inclusion in Order Point 5 difficult. For example, the Utilities are unclear about how the RentHelpMN program may work in conjunction with LIHEAP, the timeline or process for making awards, and how the amount of the awards are determined. There has also been customer confusion regarding the RentHelpMN program, with inconsistent information shared with customers and utilities about the process and steps customers

should take to access resources or receive updates. Utilities are deeply concerned that this confusion could lead to unintended consequences as it relates to LIHEAP applications and the complementary programs described earlier in these comments, as well as the protections provided for in Order Point 5 specific to LIHEAP. To date, there has been limited sharing of information with utilities by Minnesota Housing regarding RentHelpMN and how the overall process works or where collaboration opportunities may exist with Minnesota Housing, field partners, or both. It appears there is no established system that utilities can directly access to securely extract RentHelpMN information, view payment details, or determine general application status. This is in sharp contrast to the processes, communication, and systems in place for LIHEAP. Further, the Utilities understand that the primary focus for this program is those with past due rent, not past due utilities, though it appears there are multiple phases anticipated.

For these reasons, the Utilities respectfully request Minnesota Housing provide further information regarding details about RentHelpMN, how they anticipate updates regarding application status will be shared, and if there is a secure, automated method by which RentHelpMN can share other important details such as anticipated award amount, specifically how much would be available beyond rental assistance to help recipients with energy bills, and timing of the payment. Absent these details and assurances that RentHelpMN could provide similar transparency to that which is afforded by LIHEAP, the Utilities are challenged to support a modification to Order Point 5 of the Commission's May 26, 2021 Order. Alternatively, the Utilities would gladly work with Minnesota Housing to establish a process for considering RentHelpMN as part of payment plans for customers in order to provide a similar protection; however, the Utilities do not believe the infrastructure or processes are in place to effectively adopt the request as filed and effectively honor expanded commitments to Order Point 5 for RentHelpMN.

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cc: Service Lists

STATE OF MINNESOTA)
) ss
COUNTY OF ST. LOUIS)

AFFIDAVIT OF SERVICE VIA
ELECTRONIC FILING

Tiana Heger of the City of Duluth, County of St. Louis, State of Minnesota, says that on the 15th day of September, 2021, she served the Joint Utility Comments in **E,G-999/CI-20-375** on the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission and the Energy Resources Division of the Minnesota Department of Commerce via electronic filing. The persons on E-Docket's Official Service List for this Docket were served as requested.



Tiana Heger

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