

NOTICE OF COMMENT PERIOD

Issued: September 27, 2021

In the Matter of an Inquiry into Actions by Electric and Natural Gas Utilities in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic Emergency

PUC Docket Number(s): E, G-999/CI-20-375

Comment Period: Comment period closes October 4, 2021 at 4:30pm

The Executive Secretary finds good cause for shortening the comment period to allow timely action on the Minnesota Housing and Finance Agency (MHFA) request to help protect vulnerable people from disconnection of utility services.

Comments received after the close of the comment period may or may not be considered by the Commission.

Issue: What action should the Commission take on the clarified request by the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency (MHFA)?

Topics Open for Comment:

- Should the Commission extend some of the consumer protections granted in its May 26, 2021 Order by approving the clarified request by the MHFA to prohibit utility disconnections, until April 30, 2022, for utility customers only while they have a pending application or have been deemed eligible for RentHelpMN's utility arrears assistance?
- Do the short-term solutions described by MHFA resolve utilities' and other stakeholders' concerns with lack of access to RentHelpMN program information, including application status, utility payments and payment timing, and programmatic updates?
- Is MHFA's proposal to provide information sufficient and timely for a utility to protect eligible customers from utility disconnection?
- Are there other issues of concern that should be addressed?

Background:

In the Commission's May 26, 2021 order in this docket, it established the following:

5. 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).

On September 9, 2021, the MHFA filed a letter requesting that the Commission deem pending and approved RentHelpMN applications the same as LIHEAP (Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program) applications and prohibit disconnection for these customers. This request has since been modified.

RentHelpMN is federal assistance administered by the MHFA that makes it possible for eligible renters to catch up on overdue rent and utilities dating back to March 13, 2020. In addition to LIHEAP, some utility customers are taking advantage of RentHelpMN assistance to pay their utility bills; however, without a change by the Commission customers with RentHelpMN applications or assistance are subject to utility disconnections.

On September 15, 2021, comments were filed by Consumer Advocates¹, Community Mediation Minnesota (CMM), Violence Free Minnesota (VFM), African Career, Education and Resource Inc. (ACER), a group of utilities² and Dakota Electric Association.

CMM, VFM and ACER all voiced support for the inclusion of MHFA's RentHelpMN program in the Commission's May 26, 2021 Order for protection of utility disconnection until April 30, 2022. Likewise, the Consumer Advocates and utilities are also supportive of extending disconnection protection to applicants to the RentHelpMN program, but concerns were highlighted related to the ability of utilities to verify applicants to MHFA's program and timely communication surrounding applications and payments.

On September 17, 2021, the Department of Commerce, Division of Energy Resources, filed a letter generally agreeing that RentHelpMN applicants should be protected from disconnection and requested MHFA to address the extent to which program applicants may already be protected through other avenues and the processes by which it will provide utilities with the information necessary to protect RentHelpMN applicants and participants from disconnection, and how MHFA notifies applicants of other assistance such as LIHEAP and the protections of the Cold Weather Rule.

On Septet 23, 2021, MHFA filed a letter to clarify their request, included in part below, and responded to concerns brought forward by the parties and the Department of Commerce.

Minnesota Housing would like to clarify that our request to suspend disconnections is meant to be for RentHelpMN applications where the applicants have applied for assistance to address utility arrears. We also would like to clarify that our request is meant to suspend utility disconnections through April 2022 only while the applicant has a pending RentHelpMN application. If the customer has a RentHelpMN application that has been resolved by either being denied or

¹ Consumer Advocates include the Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota (CUB), the Legal Services Advocacy Project (LSAP), the EnergyCents Coalition (ECC) and HOME Line.

² The Joint Utilities include CenterPoint Energy Minnesota Gas, Greater Minnesota Gas, Xcel Energy, Great Plains Natural Gas, Minnesota Energy Resources Corp, Minnesota Power, and Otter Tail Power Company

having the past due balances paid, we do not intend to limit credit activities for that renter through April 2022.

As noted above, the Executive Secretary finds good cause for shortening the comment period to allow timely action on the MHFA request to help protect vulnerable people from disconnection of utility services.

Filing Requirements: Utilities, telecommunications carriers, official parties, and state agencies are **required** to file documents using the Commission's electronic filing system (eFiling). All parties, participants and interested persons are encouraged to use eFiling: mn.gov/puc, select *eFiling*, and follow the prompts.

Submit Public Comments:

Online: Visit mn.gov/puc, select Comment and follow the prompts

Email: consumer.puc@state.mn.us

U.S. Mail: Consumer Affairs Office
Minnesota Public Utilities Commission
121 7th Place East, Suite 350
St. Paul MN 55101

Full Case Record: See all documents filed in this docket via the Commission's website at mn.gov/puc, select *Search eDockets*, enter the year (20) and the docket number (375), select *Search*.

Subscribe to receive email notification when new documents are filed in this docket at mn.gov/puc, select *Subscribe*, or click [HERE](#) and follow the prompts.

Questions about this docket or Commission process and procedure? Contact Commission staff, Kelly Martone, at kelly.martone@state.mn.us or 651-201-2245.

For questions or more information on RentHelpMN, please visit MN Housing Agency's website: <https://www.mnhousing.gov/sites/np/covid19emergencyrentalassistance>

Change your mailing preferences: Email docketing.puc@state.mn.us or call Leesa Norton at 651-201-2246.

To request this document in another format such as large print or audio, call 651-296-0406 (voice). Consumers with a hearing or speech impairment may call using their preferred Telecommunications Relay Service or email consumer.puc@state.mn.us for assistance.

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, Chrishna Beard, hereby certify that I have this day, served a true and correct copy of the following document to all persons at the addresses indicated below or on the attached list by electronic filing, electronic mail, courier, interoffice mail or by depositing the same enveloped with postage paid in the United States mail at St. Paul, Minnesota.

**Minnesota Public Utilities Commission
NOTICE OF COMMENT PERIOD**

Docket Number **E, G-999/CI-20-375**

Dated this 27th day of September, 2021

/s/ Chrishna Beard

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