# STATE OF MINNESOTA BEFORE THE MINNESOTA PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

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In the Matter of Xcel Energy's Tariff Revisions Updating Community Solar Garden Tariff Providing Additional Customer Protections in Subscription Eligibility DOCKET NO. E-002/M-21-695

In the Matter of the Petition of Northern States Power Company, d/b/a Xcel Energy, for Approval of its Proposed Community Solar Garden Program DOCKET NO. E-003/M-13-867

# Reply Comments of Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid and Legal Services Advocacy Project Updated Background

The undersigned welcome this opportunity to submit Reply Comments in these dockets. Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid and Legal Services Advocacy Project (hereinafter "Legal Aid") are grateful for the meticulous Comments of other parties, and informative communications as well, leading up to the conclusion of this Reply Comment time period. As with its initial Comment, Legal Aid's Reply Comment will focus on broader and more general housing concerns in connection with the Community Solar Garden (CSG) model. This Reply Comment will also briefly address changes to the "in care of" billing model proposed by Energy Cents Coalition (ECC).

Legal Aid's perspective is, as set forth previously, that the legal, and perhaps technological landscapes have evolved in the years that the CSG dockets have been open. These developments include increased eviction-related litigation that includes or turns on landlord or landlord-agent practices in the utility billing and shutoff areas, as well as technological advances in the advent of

future generation, distribution, and billing for solar energy via expansion of the existing regulated provider infrastructure. Presumably, the latter would incorporate traditional regulated provider billing and the attendant established consumer protection framework.

In the two weeks since initial Comments were filed, it was reinforced to the undersigned that "in care of" billing cannot be counted on to preserve a full LIHEAP benefit and tenant access to Crisis funds for a tenant who had been a direct customer of the regulated provider. These general points will be discussed below.

#### **Discussion**

# 1. Legal Aid has Continuing Concerns with the CSG Model that are Not Resolved by "In Care Of" Billing.

On March 19, 2024, in a second conversation with a different representative at the office of a local LIHEAP administrator, undersigned attorney Van Winkle was again informed that the "in care of" billing model cannot be counted on to preserve a full LIHEAP benefit or access to Crisis funds. The representative stated that the form of, or the name on the bill, would not necessarily guarantee tenant access to a full LIHEAP benefit or to Crisis funds. The representative said that the problem would be that the LIHEAP funds were ultimately going to the landlord or third-party biller and not to the utility provider. That official volunteered that she had tracking concerns even if a full LIHEAP benefit were awarded. Specifically, she asked, how would any service credit resulting from a full benefit be tracked and verified as having been applied to the tenant's service account(?). The point is, and it has been reinforced now by multiple LIHEAP agency representatives that, at least where critical LIHEAP and Crisis benefits are concerned, "in care of" billing does not place a tenant in the same position as a direct customer of the utility provider. It appears this problem would not exist but for the third-party billing and re-billing aspects of the CSG model.

Legal Aid agrees also with commenters who noted the burdensome and complex nature of this utility billing approach, which is not alleviated by the "in care of" billing method. For example throughout its impressively detailed Comment, but particularly on pages 4-5, ECC notes and discusses seven different points at which misinformation or lack of information could negatively impact tenants. For example, at the top of page 4 of its Comment, ECC references problems with tracking and crediting of tenant PowerOn payments. On page 5 of its Comment, ECC notes the potential for tenants' not being aware of the "in care of" billing option. At the bottom of page 5 of its Comment, ECC refers to a LIHEAP tracking problem, that appears to echo the earlier LIHEAP representative's remarks.

Turning to ECC's suggested revisions, while Legal Aid does oppose approval of the Compliance Filing and of the CSG model – Legal Aid supports these proposed revisions, with an addition. Legal Aid would restore monthly mailing of paper utility provider bills to "in care of" billing tenants. Legal Aid does understand that it has been stated that restoring such billings is not feasible. The tenant's status in the "in care of" billing model as a continuing customer might be much clearer however, if tenants were simply mailed a monthly bill as before. This step would not undo the billing complexity in Legal Aid's view, but it might reinforce that the tenant remains a utility customer and make this billing model more easily understood by the end-user.

Because the "in care of" billing model does not place a LIHEAP recipient in the same position as a direct customer of the utility provider though, Legal Aid opposes this model and the Compliance Filing.

2. Third-Party Utility Billing and Re-Billing Converts Utility Billing Disputes into Threats of Eviction and Potential Loss of Housing.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>The increased eviction risk created by utility re-billing and utility third-party billing will be discussed in the next section.

Until relatively recently, Legal Aid saw only a limited number of evictions or other housing problems involving utility billing, and then usually involving only apportioned billing pursuant to Minnesota Statutes Section 504B.215.<sup>2</sup> In the past decade, there has been an increase in Legal Aid housing intakes at the Minneapolis office involving sub-metering. There has been an increase also in intakes where a landlord has placed a direct-metered tenant account in the landlord's name. Both of these developments have increased the frequency with which Legal Aid sees evictions that turn on, or which include, issues stemming from landlord or third-party utility billing or re-billing.

As discussed in Legal Aid's initial Comment, higher-profile utility litigation – often involving landlord or third-party utility billing or re-billing – is on the rise in Minnesota. This litigation has included injunctive protection from eviction for tenants in numerous, multiple-family dwellings, obtained by the Office of the Minnesota Attorney General. Legal Aid believes it is critical for the Commission and the stakeholders to understand that the perhaps benign-appearing practice of transferring utility billing from a regulated provider to a landlord or landlord agent creates the potential for a threat to housing, where such a threat had not previously existed.

Considering the evolution of these solar energy dockets – there appears to be a particular and specific incentive for landlords and their agents to engage in utility billing and rebilling. As mentioned, landlord and third-party utility billing already exists in Minnesota to some degree – the CSG model is not inventing third party utility billing or re-billing. Respectfully, it does not follow however, that it is in the public interest of Minnesota utility end-users to approve a solar energy delivery and billing model that incorporates landlord or third-party utility billing and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Both undersigned attorneys have decades of experience collectively and roughly equally -- in housing and utility litigation, as well as in legislative and regulatory matters.

re-billing to end-users. Based on the case intakes at Legal Aid, the problems created by such a model pose a particularly acute threat to the housing of low-income tenants.

Recently it has come to the attention of the undersigned that elsewhere in Minnesota, plans exist to provide access to utility-scale solar energy supplied by a regulated utility provider. Presumably, this would or could incorporate traditional modes of utility billing that would include widespread access to solar energy, and would maintain the consumer protection umbrella that exists via Minnesota Statutes, Minnesota Rules, and under the watchful eyes of this Commission. If economies of scale might make such a model feasible – or soon feasible – Legal Aid respectfully requests that such a model be considered instead of the CSG model.

#### Conclusion

For the reasons stated herein and including those contained in the initial Comment of Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid and Legal Services Advocacy Project, we respectfully ask that the Commission re-consider the question whether approving the proposed CSG solar energy model and the Compliance filing herein best serves the public interest of Minnesota utility end-users.

March 22, 2024

Respectfully submitted:

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Additional signature on the following page

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## Respectfully submitted:

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#### **CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

I, <u>Sabina Beck</u>, hereby certify that on March 22, 2024 I served copies of the foregoing document upon the attached list of persons. I also certify that on March 8, 2024 I served copies of *Comments of Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid and Legal Services Advocacy Project Regarding Xcel Energy's Compliance Filing of January 16, 2024 that were filed on March 8, 2024, upon the attached list of persons.* 

X Electronic Filing

DOCKET No. E-002/M-21-695

DOCKET No. E-002/M-13-867

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