

Thursday, August 20, 2020

***Submitted via email***

Alabama Public Service Commission  
Commission President Twinkle Andress Cavanaugh  
Commissioner Jeremy H. Oden, Place 1  
Commissioner Chris “Chip” Beeker, Place 2  
100 North Union Street  
P.O. Box 304260  
Montgomery, AL 36130

Dear Commissioners,

We, the members of the undersigned organizations, urge the Alabama Public Service Commission (PSC) and Alabama Power to take immediate and decisive action to ensure that no Alabamian will lose access to electricity as a result of the continued economic and public health crises caused by COVID-19. On August 18, 2020, Alabama Power announced the end of the moratorium on electricity disconnections and the return of late fees for non-payment starting on September 29, giving households only four months to pay all current bills and accumulated debt from nonpayment(1).

The unemployment rate in Alabama reached 13.8%(2), the highest in almost 40 years(3). The economic effects of the ongoing pandemic are expected to continue through at least 2022(4), including unemployment and the related inability to pay utility bills. Since Alabama Power does not report on non-payments, arrearage, or disconnections, we do not know how many Alabamians could be affected. Without steady income, the mounting debt faced by Alabama families as a result of electricity non-payment will not abate simply because the moratorium on disconnections is lifted. Credible estimates put the number of Alabama households vulnerable to COVID-19-related utility bill nonpayment at 459,087, or 21% of all households in Alabama(5).

As we continue to follow Governor Kay Ivey’s “Safer at Home” guidelines, our electricity usages, and subsequent cost, rise to higher than normal levels(6). With children returning to school, most of them remotely, electricity is crucial for access to educational resources. Many adults in the workforce are also continuing to work from home, causing increased demand for utilities from home. Alabama summers are notoriously hot, and access to cooled indoor public spaces is severely limited. With more people confined to their homes, they must use air conditioning at home to prevent the risk of heatstroke in this time of crisis(7). Many Alabamians with disabilities live on fixed incomes, and budgets are already extremely tight. What spare money they have often goes toward medical and personal care.

High utility bills are prohibitively expensive, meaning people with disabilities will lose access to heat or air conditioning and risk exacerbating or accelerating life-threatening medical conditions.

The people of Alabama are struggling with the balance of staying healthy during a global pandemic that is threatening their livelihood. The duration of this public health crisis is unknown and indefinite, and arbitrary deadlines amid this uncertainty are unacceptable and threatening to the public welfare. We call on the PSC and Alabama Power to grant Alabama families time to adjust to the unprecedented economic hardships that accompany this pandemic, and the resources to do so by providing continued relief.

We call on Alabama Power to provide electricity debt relief by forgiving the accumulated debt of its most vulnerable customers. The cost to Southern Company, the holding company of Alabama Power, of providing electricity bill relief to Alabama Power customers vulnerable to electricity non-payment, would only be no more than 4-10% percent of **one year's** profits(8). Given that the crisis is ongoing and that many Alabama families are without a steady income, we call on the PSC to honor their word from March 17 and act to guarantee that, “none of [Alabama Power]’s customers whose livelihood is affected by COVID-19 will experience an interruption in service while the crisis continues.”(9) Protecting the people of this state is vital to the long-term success of Alabama’s economy, and is therefore also fundamental to Alabama Power’s self-interest.

**We demand:**

- 1) Utility debt forgiveness for all residential Alabama Power customers in non-payment for debts accumulated from April 1, 2020, through at least September 30, 2020.
- 2) Continuation of the electricity disconnection moratorium and non-payment late fees until the end of the health crisis, and at least until December 31, 2020, for residential consumers of all regulated utility companies.
- 3) After the disconnection moratorium is lifted, implementation of an income-driven payment plan, with a minimum of a twelve month repayment period, for all residential Alabama Power customers, without penalties or late fees. There is precedent for a program to implement a long-term repayment period by the Kansas Corporation Commission(7). This plan must include proactive outreach to the customer, with multiple documented attempts to contact customers about the availability of payment plan options.
- 4) Active outreach and proactive notification of LIHEAP and other available utility assistance programs to customers in non-payment.
- 5) Waiver of late fees for reinstatement of services until 2022.
- 6) Moratorium on negative credit reporting for non-payment through 2022.

## **In Service,**

J. Robert Burton, Executive Director, SWEET Alabama

Elizabeth Patton, Programs Coordinator, Disability Rights and Resources

Robyn Hyden, Executive Director, Alabama ARISE

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Scott Douglas, Executive Director, Greater Birmingham Ministries

Rev. Michael Malcolm, Executive Director, Interfaith Power and Light

Rev. David Barnhart, Pastor, Saint Junia United Methodist Church

Rev. Jennifer Sanders, Pastor, Beloved Community Church

Rev. Dr. Kevin Higgs, United Methodist Clergy

Rev. Keith Williams, Associate Minister, St. Mark Missionary Baptist Church

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Rev. Eric Hall, Co-Founder, Black Lives Matter-Birmingham

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Patricia Bell, Co-Founder, Voters Legal Justice Watch Group

Ben Eaton, President, Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice

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Daniel Tait, Chief Operating Officer, Energy Alabama

Stephen Stetson, Senior Campaign Representative, Sierra Club

Cindy Lowry, Executive Director, Alabama Rivers Alliance

Charlie Scribner, Executive Director, Black Warrior Riverkeeper

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