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Senate Democrats launch new push to avoid utility shutoffs

By Anthony Adragna

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Sen. [Jeff Merkley](#) of Oregon is leading a group of Democrats in pushing for party leaders in Congress to provide additional assistance to avoid utility shutoffs as part of the Covid-19 relief bill, [H.R. 1319 \(117\)](#), moving through reconciliation.

The group is pointing to the dayslong Texas electricity outages and ongoing pandemic as reminders of the real-world consequences if people lose power and safe drinking water access. They urge Majority Leader [Chuck Schumer](#) in [a letter](#) to pursue “a workable solution” for moratoriums on shutoffs of water, electricity and broadband in the relief package.

“We applaud President [Joe] 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,” they wrote. “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.”

Joining Merkley in the effort are Sens. [Tammy Duckworth](#) (Ill.), [Cory Booker](#) (N.J.), [Chris Van Hollen](#) (Md.), [Ron Wyden](#) (Ore.), [Alex Padilla](#) (Calif.), [Dick Durbin](#) (Ill.), [Ed Markey](#) (Mass.), [Richard Blumenthal](#) (Conn.), [Elizabeth Warren](#) (Mass.), [Dianne Feinstein](#) (Calif.), [Bernie Sanders](#) (I-Vt.), [Raphael Warnock](#) (Ga.) and [Kirsten Gillibrand](#) (N.Y.).

The details: Merkley’s office declined to release legislative text, but [one proposal being circulated and obtained by POLITICO](#) would create a new program, administered by EPA, that would effectively create grants to electric and water utilities for uncollected payments in exchange for a moratorium on shutoffs.

Those grants would begin as loans. Large utilities could ultimately have 50 percent of the totals forgiven while small and public ones could have 100 percent forgiven.

The context: The House-passed Covid-19 relief measure contains some \$5 billion in utility assistance, including \$4.5 billion in energy assistance through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program and \$500 million for drinking water and wastewater needs.

Biden extended the federal eviction moratorium through the end of March. Utility moratoriums varied by state at the start of the pandemic and many have now expired.

[A recent study by Duke University](#) estimated a nationwide utility moratorium could have avoided 8.7 percent of Covid-19 cases and 14.8 percent of deaths.

