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Coalition of 600 groups urges Biden to impose national moratorium on water shut-offs

Too many people are struggling to pay their bills, advocates say.

By

Joseph Guzman | Jan. 13, 2021

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Story at a glance

- The No Shutoffs Coalition on Wednesday presented the incoming Democratic administration with a draft executive order that would instruct the CDC to enact a moratorium on utility shut-offs.
- “People need access to water to wash their hands, cook, and drink; electricity to heat their homes through the winter, keep food and vital medicines, and charge communication devices; and broadband to be able to stay updated on safety measures, complete online schooling, and work remotely,” the coalition said in a letter to the Biden-Harris administration.

- Last year was the worst for U.S. job losses since 1939 due to lockdowns and other restrictions prompted by the coronavirus pandemic.

A coalition of more than 600 environmental, racial justice, labor and faith groups is calling on the incoming Biden administration to impose a national moratorium on utility shut-offs on day one of the administration to help struggling Americans amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The No Shutoffs Coalition on Wednesday presented the incoming Democratic administration with a draft executive order that would instruct the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to enact a moratorium on shut-offs of water, electricity, broadband, heat and other necessary utility services nationwide.

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“Enacting a nationwide moratorium on utility shutoffs is an important and urgent measure to help slow the spread of COVID-19,” the letter read.

The order would last at least 12 months after the pandemic ends and restore utilities to homes that were previously cut off.

“The public health crisis created by this pandemic has exacerbated long-standing racial and economic injustices,” Rianna Eckel, senior national organizer with the advocacy group Food & Water Watch, said in a statement.

“A national moratorium on utility shutoffs will help protect us from a deadly pandemic, and provide emergency relief for families struggling with basic necessities. The Biden-Harris administration should take immediate action that will help working families and protect public health.”

The group notes that while Congress allocated \$6 billion in funding toward electricity bill relief and \$638 million for a low-income water assistance program in December, more needs to be done to take the burden off Americans following record unemployment caused by COVID-19 restrictions. At least 226 utilities that issued moratoriums across several states last year have since let the bans expire, according to The Guardian.

“Last year, more than 600,000 customers were officially at risk of service termination or behind on their water bills in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio and North Carolina. Between September and November, the country’s largest private water utility, American Water, disconnected over 12,000 households, affecting an estimated 32,000 people, in just three states,” the coalition said in a statement.

Last year was the worst for U.S. job losses since 1939 due to lockdowns and restrictions prompted by the coronavirus pandemic. The economy last year shed a net 9.37 million jobs, surpassing the more than 5 million lost in 2009 due to the global financial crisis.