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Biden and the new Congress must protect Americans from utility shutoffs

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Almost 50,000 Georgia and North Carolina households had their power shut off by electricity giants in November. In Illinois, Missouri and Tennessee, water access for 12,600 homes — an estimated 32,000 people — was cut off by the nation's largest private water utility from September through November 2020.

Tens of thousands of people lost running water in Jacksonville, Fla., Charleston, S.C., and other communities across the South. Thirty percent of low-wealth people of color report missing an internet payment in the pandemic's early months, while roughly half are worried about paying upcoming internet and phone bills.

These staggering numbers are only the most recent drips of information about the shutoffs crisis raging across the country. The coronavirus and record unemployment have pushed millions of families into the danger zone.

There's good reason to believe that the incoming Biden administration and the new Congress will take this catastrophe seriously. But they have to act quickly and overcome some lawmakers' disturbing unwillingness to relieve American families.

Last month, Congress passed a COVID-19 relief bill that failed to bridge the growing divide between families and their human right to basic necessities.

The compromise bill didn't offer the meaningful relief required to protect working Americans. For example, a mere \$638 million was negotiated for a new low-income water bill assistance program. Yet water and wastewater providers estimate revenue losses in excess of \$30 billion — including \$9 billion in household water debts — due to the pandemic.

An additional \$3.7 billion was dedicated to electricity bill relief through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, but that doesn't cover the growing number of households in need. And while \$3.2 billion went towards broadband affordability, some broadband companies are actually raising prices as families continue to struggle.

However, come Jan. 21, two new avenues will open to combat the crisis.

First, President-elect Joe Biden can implement a nationwide shutoffs moratorium via an executive order. The Public Health Services Act empowers the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to take broad measures to stem disease spread, including imposing a utility disconnections moratorium to protect public health against the coronavirus.

Our organizations just joined more than 630 groups across all 50 states and Washington, D.C., to urge the incoming Biden administration to do just that.

Second, the new Democratic-led Congress should pass the nationwide moratorium in a desperately needed reprise of the COVID-19 relief bill.

Last year, the House of Representatives passed the HEROES Act, which included the utilities shutoff moratorium pioneered by Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.). In the Senate, Sens. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) and Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) have each introduced bills to ensure a moratorium, while incoming Vice President-elect Kamala Harris and soon-to-be Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) have championed a moratorium in negotiations.

The 117th Congress can finally pass national protections against utility shutoffs, as demanded by a coalition of more than 830 organizations and 113 members of Congress.

As of January, less than half of the country was protected from water shutoffs by a state or local moratorium. Hundreds of thousands of people across America are at risk because they've fallen behind on water bills.

For electricity, only nine states and Washington, D.C., have binding shutoff moratoria in place.

For broadband, states have had even less success passing moratoria. Instead, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) asked internet providers to sign a voluntary pledge saying they wouldn't shut off service if people couldn't pay their bills. But the pledge was completely toothless and expired after only two months.

Millions of families were forced to live without water, broadband and power long before the pandemic, losing access when financial hardship made their bills unaffordable. Utility shutoffs are not a new problem — but the global health crisis has made them both more prevalent and more urgent.

These are issues of human dignity, and as winter and the COVID-19 crisis continue, it has become a matter of life and death.

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