

<https://www.merkley.senate.gov/news/press-releases/merkley-colleagues-push-to-protect-americans-from-losing-access-to-vital-utilities-during-pandemic-2021>

# MERKLEY, COLLEAGUES PUSH TO PROTECT AMERICANS FROM LOSING ACCESS TO VITAL UTILITIES DURING PANDEMIC

**Millions of Americans are one missed payment away from losing power, heat, water, or internet**

Wednesday, March 3, 2021

Washington, D.C. – Oregon’s Senator Jeff Merkley teamed up with U.S. Senators Cory Booker (D-NJ), Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Ron Wyden (D-OR), Alex Padilla (D-CA), Edward J. Markey (D-MA), Richard Durbin (D-IL), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), and Rafael Warnock (D-GA) today to ask Senate leadership to include safeguards in the upcoming coronavirus relief package to protect the American people from losing access to critical utilities—including power, heat, water and internet services—during the pandemic.

The lawmakers’ letter comes after extreme cold in Texas and across America killed dozens of Americans and left millions more without heat and water. A recent working paper from Duke University’s Nicholas Institute found that had federal policies that ended utilities shutoffs been in place from March through November 2020, coronavirus infections could have been reduced by 8.7% and deaths could have been reduced by 14.8%, because Americans could have washed their hands more easily and avoided congregating for heat and power.

“Newly unemployed Americans are facing disconnection because of loss of income, and many Americans are having to choose between putting food on the table or keeping their heat and water. We know that too often deferred utility payments is the start of a debt spiral that results in them at risk of losing their housing. 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,” the senators wrote.

“No utility wants to disconnect their customers and we applaud the many utilities that have taken voluntary steps to prevent disconnections during this crisis. Many states also issued orders to keep utility services connected, but most of these orders have now expired even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage,” the lawmakers continued. “...The COVID-19 outbreak, as well as the tragedy last week, have highlighted the systemic problems of poverty and utility insecurity in the United States and its disparate impact on low-wealth communities and communities of color. Now is the time for our country to provide relief for the communities that are being most harmed by the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Throughout the pandemic, Merkley has led his colleagues in a series of efforts to protect Americans from utility shut-offs amid the pandemic, including by introducing the *Emergency Water and Energy is a Human Right Act* and the *CONNECT At Home Act*. Merkley asked congressional leaders to maintain essential services by providing resources for low-income Americans to maintain utility access in coronavirus relief legislation.

“Over 100,000 Georgians have had their power shut off at the height of COVID. That is unconscionable treatment, particularly for our frontline workers struggling to stay afloat. We are calling on Congress and President Biden to finally pass this live-saving protection. People should not be penalized for the COVID pandemic,” said Chandra Farley, Just Energy Director, Partnership for Southern Equity.

"Ensuring that all Americans have access to utility services during this pandemic is too important to be left to the discretion of individual utility companies. Essential workers have been on the job throughout the COVID-19 crisis making sure that households and businesses stay connected to energy, water and communications services. We need a national moratorium on utility shutoffs so that service providers hold up their end of the bargain," said Chris Shelton, Communications Workers of America President.

"The Texas energy catastrophe shone a light on how losing utilities can be a matter of life and death. Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of families have lived that reality since COVID began, and millions are at risk of losing access to these basic human rights as the economic crisis continues. We applaud Senator Merkley and other Senate champions for pushing for a nationwide protection against utility shutoffs. We urge Congress and President Biden to finally enact these protections and make long-term infrastructure investments to ensure no family needlessly suffers from our broken utility systems in the future," said Jean Su, Energy Justice Director, Center for Biological Diversity.

"Broadband is an essential service, especially during a pandemic when getting online can mean the difference between keeping up with remote learning and falling behind, between signing up for a vaccination appointment and missing out, between staying informed in an emergency and being left in the dark. No one should lose internet during a crisis. It's time for the federal government to commit to prioritizing people's needs over provider's profits and prohibit these shutoffs across the board," said Dana Floberg, Policy Manager, Free Press Action.

"Right now, 57 percent of the country is not protected from having their water shut off. This has deadly consequences: A recent study showed that nearly 15% of COVID deaths would have been prevented with a utility shutoff moratorium in place. Instead of stopping water shutoffs, the previous administration actually recommended that people without

access to clean water could use contaminated water or hand sanitizer instead. Congress and President Biden must respond with more compassion by prohibiting utility shutoffs now. We applaud Senator Merkley and the other Senate leaders for showing the leadership we need,” said Rianna Eckel, Senior Organizer, National Organizing Team, Food & Water Watch.

“We are one year into a deadly pandemic, with families struggling to pay for essential services like energy, water and broadband. Right now, residential customers and small business owners are estimated to owe between 35 and 40 billion in utility debt. Congress needs to immediately cancel all utility debt and implement a national moratorium on utility shutoffs. We are so grateful for Senator Merkley and our other champions enduring work on this issue,” said Johanna Bozuwa, Climate & Energy Program Co-Manager, The Democracy Collaborative.

“Millions of low income Americans have fallen behind on their energy bills due to COVID-related job losses and with moratoriums expiring in 22 states this month, they could soon be facing disconnection. Some families already struggling to pay their bills are now as much as \$3,000 behind and the total consumer debt already exceeds \$30 billion. We need Congress to step in with increased funding of at least \$10 billion to ensure we avert this looming crisis,” said Mark Wolfe, Executive Director, National Energy Assistance Directors Association.

The full text of the letter to Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-NY) is available [here](#) and follows below.

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Dear Leader Schumer,

The tragedy in Texas and across the United States as climate-induced extreme cold killed dozens of Americans and left millions more without heat and water is a stark reminder of why these services are

essential for Americans. Unfortunately, as our country continues to struggle with the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic tens of thousands of Americans have already had services disconnected because they cannot pay their mounting bills and millions more are at risk of disconnection. We applaud President 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.

While always essential, utility services are especially critical for public health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent working paper from Duke University's Nicholas Institute found that had federal policies that ended utilities shutoffs been in place from March through November 2020, COVID-19 infections could have been reduced by 8.7% and COVID-19 deaths could have been reduced by 14.8%. Water service ensures that Americans can hand wash in order to slow the coronavirus outbreak. Energy is necessary for families to heat their homes and turn on the lights, while allowing households to avoid congregating which can lead to the spread of COVID-19. Internet access is essential for people to schedule COVID-19 vaccination appointments and access vital public health information, as well as allow adults to work from home and children to learn safely from distance learning. Vulnerable elderly populations need electricity to run life-saving medical equipment, keep medications refrigerated, and keep their homes at livable temperatures.

Newly unemployed Americans are facing disconnection because of loss of income, and many Americans are having to choose between putting food on the table or keeping their heat and water. We know that too often deferred utility payments is the start of a debt spiral that results in them at risk of losing their housing. 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.

No utility wants to disconnect their customers and we applaud the many utilities that have taken voluntary steps to prevent disconnections during this crisis. Many states also issued orders to keep utility services connected, but most of these orders have now expired even as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage. For all of us to get through this together we need to have a national policy that helps to ensure that no family is left behind in a patchwork of policies.

The COVID-19 outbreak, as well as the tragedy last week, have highlighted the systemic problems of poverty and utility insecurity in the United States and its disparate impact on low-wealth communities and communities of color. Now is the time for our country to provide relief for the communities that are being most harmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to working with you to find a workable solution to ensure that all families maintain their essential services in this difficult time.

Sincerely,