

STATE OF VERMONT  
PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION

Case No. 20-0703-PET

Vermont Legal Aid request for moratorium on utility and telecommunications shutoffs during State of Emergency	
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Order entered: 03/18/2020

**ORDER GRANTING TEMPORARY MORATORIUM ON INVOLUNTARY  
NATURAL GAS, ELECTRIC, AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS SERVICE DISCONNECTIONS**

This proceeding concerns a March 16, 2020, petition from Vermont Legal Aid to the Vermont Public Utility Commission (“Commission”) requesting the cessation of involuntary utility disconnections during the current state of emergency in Vermont as a result of the global pandemic known as COVID-19. Vermont Legal Aid filed its petition “on behalf of the low-income, disabled and elderly residents of the state” and has requested that the Commission “impose a moratorium on gas, electric and telecommunication shutoffs for all residential ratepayers until the state of emergency in Vermont is lifted.”<sup>1</sup> At the time that Vermont Legal Aid filed its petition, the Vermont Department of Public Service (“Department”) was already actively working with regulated utilities on voluntary cessations of disconnections during this state of emergency. Many regulated utilities (including Green Mountain Power Corporation, Vermont Gas Systems, the Vermont Electric Cooperative, Burlington Electric Department, and others) have already informed the Department and the Commission that they are temporarily ceasing disconnections during this time. Other companies have followed suit, such as Comcast Cable Company and AT&T. The Commission greatly appreciates the efforts of the utilities and the Department to meet the challenge posed by this emerging health threat.

To ensure that all Vermonters are protected from utility disconnections during this state of emergency, in today’s Order, the Commission grants Vermont Legal Aid’s petition and temporarily places a moratorium on the involuntary disconnection of natural gas, electric, and telecommunications service to residential consumers of regulated utilities in Vermont. This temporary moratorium shall remain in place until April 30, 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from David Koeninger, Esq., to Judith C. Whitney, Clerk of the Commission, filed on 3/16/2020, at 1.

Both the State of Vermont and the federal government have declared a state of emergency due to the outbreak of the new coronavirus known as COVID-19. As the Governor has declared, Vermont is in a state of emergency “to monitor and plan for the potential for an outbreak of respiratory illness due to a novel coronavirus (a disease now known as COVID-19).”<sup>2</sup> Governor Scott has noted that “both travel-related cases and community contact transmission of COVID-19 have been detected in the region,” and that, “if no mitigation steps are taken, COVID-19 would likely spread in Vermont at a rate similar to the rate of spread in other states and countries, and the number of persons requiring medical care could exceed locally available resources.”<sup>3</sup> Given this emergency situation, the Governor has stated that “Vermonters must come together as we have before in a crisis.”<sup>4</sup>

In light of this Executive Order and other authority that the Legislature has vested in the Commission, we open this proceeding and grant Vermont Legal Aid’s petition for temporary relief. Under Section 209(a)(3) of Title 30 of the Vermont Statutes Annotated, the Commission has authority to issue orders to ensure that utility business conduct promotes the “safety, convenience, and accommodation of the public.”<sup>5</sup> Commission Rule 2.406(B) also provides authority for the Commission to issue a temporary restraining order when “substantial immediate and irreparable injury, loss or damage, or danger to health or safety, will result to the petitioner before a hearing can be held upon proper notice.”<sup>6</sup>

As Vermont Legal Aid correctly states, and as we find, “health experts have advised Vermont residents to stay home” and, as a result, many may lose their jobs and income.<sup>7</sup> We therefore agree with Vermont Legal Aid and find that “when Vermonters have been ordered to stay hunkered down at home, [utility] shutoffs would put the health and safety of vulnerable individuals and families at particularly grave risk.”<sup>8</sup> We find that the spread of COVID-19 creates a unique peril to the safety, convenience, and accommodation of the public, particularly in relation to utility service. At a time when citizens are being encouraged to remain at home for

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<sup>2</sup> Vermont Executive Order No. 01-20, issued on 3/13/2020 (“Executive Order”).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>5</sup> 30 V.S.A. § 209(a)(3).

<sup>6</sup> While Rule 2.406(B) ordinarily requires affidavits or a verified petition, we waive this requirement in light of the emergency situation presented to us today. Further, we note that all of the findings made in today’s Order, while not separately stated in their own section, are findings of fact as that term is used in Commission Rule 2.406(E)(5).

<sup>7</sup> Letter from David Koeninger, Esq., to Judith C. Whitney, Clerk of the Commission, filed on 3/16/2020, at 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

an indeterminate amount of time and in a severely trying situation, the uninterrupted continuance of natural gas, electric, and telecommunications service is essential to the public good.

In issuing this temporary moratorium, we join neighboring jurisdictions, including Rhode Island and Connecticut, that have also decided to suspend utility disconnections at this time.<sup>9</sup>

This temporary moratorium is effective immediately and forbids the involuntary termination or disconnection of natural gas, electric, or telecommunications services to residential customers in Vermont between now and April 30, 2020.<sup>10</sup>

We recognize that this Order was issued without our normal attendant request for comments from interested parties, particularly the affected regulated utilities. The emergency nature of the situation and concurrent danger to the public required immediate action by the Commission. To provide an opportunity to better inform the situation going forward, we ask those interested in doing so to file comments on the temporary moratorium – including whether the moratorium should remain in place and, if so, for how long, and what further process should be undertaken going forward – by **no later than March 25, 2020**. If any of the affected utilities or any other party objects to this temporary moratorium, or wishes to request a hearing or any other process, those objections – and related motions – shall also be filed by March 25, 2020.<sup>11</sup>

This case is being processed in the Commission's online document management system, known as ePUC, which can be accessed at <http://epuc.vermont.gov>. Information about how to use ePUC, including how to make a filing and how to search for documents, is available on the Commission's website at <http://puc.vermont.gov/epuc-information>.

**SO ORDERED.**

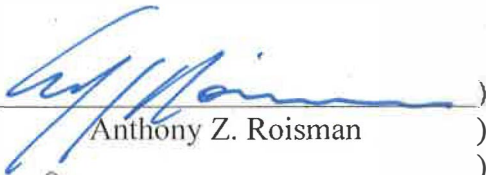
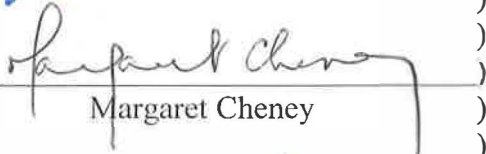

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<sup>9</sup> See *In Re: Suspension of Service Terminations and Certain Collections Activities During the COVID-19 Emergency*, State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations Public Utilities Commission, Docket No. 5022, Order issued 3/17/2020; *Emergency Petition of William Tong, Attorney General for the State of Connecticut for a Proceeding to Establish a State of Emergency Utility Shut-off Moratorium*, Docket No. 20-03-15, State of Connecticut Public Utilities Regulatory Authority, Order issued 3/12/2020.

<sup>10</sup> Nothing in this Order shall be interpreted as relieving customers of their obligation to pay what is due to their utilities. This Order only affects the utilities' ability to disconnect residential customers for non-payment.

<sup>11</sup> If a hearing is requested, it will be held within 45 days of this Order, and we will issue a decision on preliminary or permanent relief within 60 days of this Order, in accordance with Commission Rule 2.406(C).

Dated at Montpelier, Vermont, this 18th day of March, 2020.

	)	
Anthony Z. Roisman	)	PUBLIC UTILITY
	)	
	)	
Margaret Cheney	)	COMMISSION
	)	
	)	
Sarah Hofmann	)	OF VERMONT

OFFICE OF THE CLERK

Filed: March 18, 2020

Attest.   
Clerk of the Commission

*Notice to Readers: This decision is subject to revision of technical errors. Readers are requested to notify the Clerk of the Commission (by e-mail, telephone, or in writing) of any apparent errors, in order that any necessary corrections may be made. (E-mail address: [puc.clerk@vermont.gov](mailto:puc.clerk@vermont.gov))*

*Appeal of this decision to the Supreme Court of Vermont must be filed with the Clerk of the Commission within 30 days. Appeal will not stay the effect of this Order, absent further order by this Commission or appropriate action by the Supreme Court of Vermont. Motions for reconsideration or stay, if any, must be filed with the Clerk of the Commission within 28 days of the date of this decision and Order.*

PUC Case No. 20-0703-PET - SERVICE LIST

Parties:

Carolyn Browne Anderson, Esq. (for Green Mountain Power Corporation)  
Green Mountain Power Corporation  
2152 Post Road  
Rutland, VT 05702  
carolyn.anderson@greenmountainpower.com

Reginald Beliveau, Jr. (for Swanton Village, Inc. Electric  
Swanton Village, Inc. Electric Department Department)  
P.O. Box 279  
120 First Street  
Swanton, VT 05488  
rbeliveau@swanton.net

Meredith Birkett (for Village of Johnson Water & Light  
Village of Johnson Water & Light Department Department)  
P.O. Box 603  
Johnson, VT 05656  
vojmanager@townofjohnson.com

Victoria J. Brown, Esq. (for Vermont Electric Cooperative Inc.)  
Vermont Electric Cooperative, Inc.  
42 Wescom Road  
Johnson, VT 05656  
vbrown@vermontelectric.coop

Ellen Burt (for Town of Stowe Electric Department)  
Town of Stowe Electric Department  
P.O.Box 190  
Stowe, VT 05672  
eburt@stoweelectric.com

William F. Ellis (for City of Burlington Electric Department)  
McNeil, Leddy & Sheahan  
271 South Union Street  
Burlington, VT 05401  
wellis@mcneilvt.com

Jonathan Elwell (for Village of Enosburg Falls Water & Light  
Village of Enosburg Falls Water & Light Department Inc.)  
42 Village Drive  
Enosburg Falls, VT 05450  
jelwell@enosburg.net

Elijah D Emerson, Esq.  
Primmer Piper Eggleston & Cramer PC  
PO Box 1309  
Montpelier, VT 05601  
eemerson@primmer.com

(for Town of Northfield Electric Department)  
(for Village of Johnson Water & Light  
Department) (for Village of Enosburg Falls  
Water & Light Department Inc.) (for Town of  
Hardwick Electric Department)

Steven R Farman  
Vermont Public Power Supply Authority  
5195 Waterbury-Stowe rd  
Waterbury Center, VT 05766  
sfarman@vppsa.com

(for Vermont Public Power Supply Authority)

James Gibbons  
City of Burlington Electric Department  
585 Pine Street  
Burlington, VT 05401  
jgibbons@burlingtonelectric.com

(for City of Burlington Electric Department)

Jeremy D. Hoff  
Stackpole & French  
Stackpole & French  
P.O. Box 819  
Stowe, VT 05672  
jhoff@stackpolefrench.com

(for Town of Stowe Electric Department)

Bill Humphrey  
Village of Lyndonville Electric Department  
P.O. Box 167  
20 Park Avenue  
Lyndonville, VT 05851  
bhumphrey@lyndonvilleelectric.com

(for Village of Lyndonville Electric  
Department)

W. David Koeninger  
Vermont Legal Aid  
264 North Winooski Ave.  
Burlington, VT 05401  
DKoeninger@vtlegalaid.org

(for Vermont Legal Aid)

Mari McClure  
Green Mountain Power Corporation  
163 Acorn Lane  
Colchester, VT 05446  
ceo@greenmountainpower.com

(for Green Mountain Power Corporation)

Pamela Moore  
Village of Jacksonville Electric Company  
P.O. Box 169  
Jacksonville, VT 05342  
pmoore@jacksonvilleelectric.net

(for Village of Jacksonville Electric Company)

John Morley  
Village of Orleans Electric Department  
Municipal Building  
One Memorial Square  
Orleans, VT 05860  
orloffice@villageoforleansvt.org

(for Village of Orleans Electric Department)

Craig Myotte  
Village of Morrisville Water & Light  
Department  
857 Elmore Street  
Morrisville, VT 05661  
cmyotte@mwlvt.com

(for Village of Morrisville Water & Light  
Department)

Ken Nolan  
Vermont Public Power Supply Authority  
P.O. Box 126  
Waterbury Center, VT 05677  
knolan@vppsa.com

(for Vermont Public Power Supply Authority)

Jessica Patterson  
Town of Hardwick Electric Department  
PO Box 516  
Hardwick, VT 05843  
jess@hardwickelectric.com

(for Town of Hardwick Electric Department)

Thomas Petraska  
Village of Ludlow Electric Light Department  
9 Pond Street  
Ludlow, VT 05149  
tpetraska@tds.net

(for Village of Ludlow Electric Light  
Department)

James Porter, Esq.  
Vermont Department of Public Service  
Vermont Public Service Department  
112 State St  
Montpelier, VT 05620  
james.porter@vermont.gov

(for Vermont Department of Public Service)

Donald Rendall, Jr., Esq.  
Vermont Gas Systems, Inc.  
85 Swift Street  
South Burlington, VT 05403  
drendall@vermontgas.com

(for Vermont Gas Systems, Inc.)

Patricia Richards  
Washington Electric Cooperative, Inc.  
P.O. Box 8  
East Montpelier, VT 05651  
patty.richards@wec.coop

(for Washington Electric Cooperative Inc.)

Evan Riordan  
Barton Village, Inc. Electric Department  
P.O. Box 519  
Barton, VT 05822  
electricmanager@bartonvt.com

(for Barton Village Inc. Electric Department)

Carol Robertson  
Village of Hyde Park Electric Department  
P.O. Box 400  
Hyde Park, VT 05655  
carol.robertson@hydeparkvt.com

(for Village of Hyde Park Electric Department)

Matt Rutherford  
Town of Stowe Electric Department  
P.O. Box 190  
56 Old Farm Road  
Stowe, VT 05672  
mrutherford@stoweelectric.com

(for Town of Stowe Electric Department)

Jeffrey Schulz  
Town of Northfield Electric Department  
51 South Main Street  
Northfield, VT 05663  
jschulz@northfield.vt.us

(for Town of Northfield Electric Department)

Ronald A. Shems, Esq.  
Tarrant Gillies & Richardson  
P.O. Box 1440  
Montpelier, VT 05601-1440  
rshems@tgrvt.com

(for Washington Electric Cooperative Inc.)



Eileen Simollardes  
Vermont Gas Systems, Inc.  
85 Swift Street  
South Burlington, VT 05403  
esimollardes@vermontgas.com

(for Vermont Gas Systems, Inc.)

Darren Springer  
City of Burlington Electric Department  
585 Pine Street  
Burlington, VT 05401  
dspringer@burlingtonelectric.com

(for City of Burlington Electric Department)

Emily Stebbins-Wheelock  
City of Burlington Electric Department  
585 Pine Street  
Burlington, VT 05401  
estebbins-wheelock@burlingtonelectric.com

(for City of Burlington Electric Department)

Melissa Stevens, Esq.  
Green Mountain Power Corporation  
2152 Post Road  
Rutland, VT 05701  
melissa.stevens@greenmountainpower.com

(for Green Mountain Power Corporation)

Michael Sullivan  
Town of Hardwick Electric Department  
P.O. Box 516  
Hardwick, VT 05843  
msullivan@hardwickelectric.com

(for Town of Hardwick Electric Department)

Rebecca Towne  
Vermont Electric Cooperative, Inc.  
42 Wescom Road  
Johnson, VT 05656  
rtowne@vermontelectric.coop

(for Vermont Electric Cooperative Inc.)

Other Entities Receiving Notice outside ePUC:

Vermont ILEC e-mail list