



## A Look Back at the PUC's Response to COVID-19

Over the span of more than six months, the PUC's Electricity Relief Program protected roughly 600,000 Texas households from disconnection for non-payment during the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic and the hottest days of the summer. The following FAQ addresses the program's history and success.

### What has the PUC done to help Texans experiencing economic hardship due to COVID-19?

On March 26, 2020, the Public Utility Commission of Texas responded to the governor's declaration of emergency with a plan to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on Texas utility customers experiencing genuine economic hardship as a result of the pandemic.

The self-enrollment period ended August 31, 2020 and program benefits end on 9/30/2020.

#### HOW WERE WATER UTILITY CUSTOMERS ACROSS TEXAS AFFECTED?

The commission ordered PUC-regulated water and sewer utilities across the state to immediately suspend disconnections for non-payment on residential customer accounts until June 13, 2020.

#### WHAT ABOUT ELECTRICITY CUSTOMERS OUTSIDE THE AREAS OF TEXAS WITH RETAIL COMPETITION?

The PUC ordered electricity providers outside the ERCOT grid (*namely Entergy, El Paso Electric, SPS and SWEPCO*) to suspend residential disconnections for non-payment from 3/26 to 6/13 and 7/16 to present.

*↶ The orders gave these PUC-regulated organizations a way to recover the costs of these suspensions after the crisis subsides through rate increases on their entire customer base. ↷*

#### WHAT ABOUT ELECTRIC CUSTOMERS IN THE AREA OF TEXAS OPEN TO RETAIL COMPETITION?

the PUC ordered Retail Electric Providers (REPs) in areas of the state open to competition to:

- Immediately offer a deferred payment plan to any residential customer who requests one
- Suspend late fees to residential customers until May 15, 2020.
- Under a program called the **COVID-19 Electricity Relief Program**, suspend disconnections for residential customers who have been added to the state's unemployment and low-income list due to the effects of COVID-19 until August 31, 2020.

#### How were people added to the Program?

Residential electricity customers in areas of Texas open to retail competition who qualified for unemployment benefits were able to contact the state's Low Income List Administrator (LILA) at **866-454-8387** or on the site [www.TXCOVID19ERP.org](http://www.TXCOVID19ERP.org) to request enrollment. Their call center operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

#### How did enrollment work?

After customers contacted the LILA and shared proof of unemployment status, they were provisionally added to the list and their REPs were notified within a week.



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### **So it only took a single call to self-enroll?**

Within 30 days of that call or online enrollment, customers were required provide documentation of their qualification for unemployment benefits from the Texas Workforce Commission to the LILA so they could be officially added to the lists.

### **What happened once people were added to the list?**

Per the PUC order, Retail Electric Providers could not disconnect electricity for customers who are honoring the terms of a deferred payment plan or have been added to the COVID-19 Electricity Relief Program list because they are unable to pay the bill.

### **Were participants still be billed for their electricity?**

In accordance with their contracts, REPs generated bills and customers were asked to pay as they were able. REPs would then request assistance with that bill from the Relief Program. If the REP received assistance from the ERP, the customer bill was adjusted by that amount.

### **What about customers of electric co-ops and municipal utilities?**

Operating largely outside of the PUC's jurisdiction, electric co-ops and municipal utilities, like those in Austin and San Antonio, took measures to address the financial impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their customers. Working through the press and social media, the PUC encouraged such customers to contact their power providers with questions and concerns.

### **Who paid for the program?**

Electricity still costs money to generate and, along with water, costs money to deliver. For customers protected from disconnection by participation in the Relief Program, unpaid electricity bills were borne in part by a combination of other paying customers through a new monthly fee, losses absorbed by their retail electric provider, and, eventually the customer by way of a deferred payment plan to recover any remaining amounts.

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*For more information, including our ongoing response to the COVID-19 crisis, visit*

[www.PUC.Texas.gov](http://www.PUC.Texas.gov)