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MAINE PUBLIC ADVOCATE URGES LOW INCOME ELECTRIC CUSTOMERS TO SEEK HELP WITH BILLS

With the Winter Moratorium on Disconnects Ending Soon, Consumers Should Act Now to Avoid Disconnection

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March 4, 2024 | HALLOWELL, ME – Maine Public Advocate William Harwood is urging Maine’s electric ratepayers to call 2-1-1 immediately if they are struggling to pay electric bills.

“If you are already having to make decisions between necessities like food, medicine, heat and electric bills, now is the time to act,” said Harwood. “It may be tempting to skip your electric bill in the months you know the power company likely won’t disconnect you, but it will be harder to get the help you need in the spring when all of the bills come due.”

Last year, Maine’s electric customers received more than 440,000 disconnect notices. Utilities must get special permission from Maine’s Public Utilities Commission to shut off customers for nonpayment between November 15 and April 15, creating what amounts to a disconnection moratorium during Maine’s dangerously cold winter months. In April, thousands of customers who have missed payments during the moratorium will get notices informing them they need to pay or face disconnection.

The common path for financial assistance is to first apply for the Low-Income Heating Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which qualifies applicants for other programs like the Low-Income Assistance Program (LIAP) to help pay for electricity.

“We’re hearing from the utilities that a similar number of ratepayers are behind in their bills this year compared to last year,” said Harwood. “Ratepayers should seek help from 2-1-1 and their local community action agencies now, since it can take several weeks for a LIHEAP application to make its way through the approval process. You don’t want to be sitting in the dark for weeks this spring.”

Advocates are especially concerned this year because funding sources available last year, such as the Winter Energy Relief Fund and the Homeowners Assistance Fund are now gone. In addition, the average LIHEAP benefit this year is half of what it was last year. These factors will contribute to a challenging spring.

“It’s like we’re watching an avalanche in slow motion,” said Harwood. “I urge low-income ratepayers to seek assistance now before the community action agencies are overrun by people in need this spring.”

Mainers can find contact information for their local community action agencies, and other local organizations offering assistance, by dialing 2-1-1.

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