

Moves by Congress, PSC Could Aid Struggling Utility Customers

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Legislation approved Monday by Congress will provide help to utility customers behind on their bills and low-income customers of water and wastewater utilities.

In addition, the state Public Service Commission on Tuesday approved an arrearage forgiveness program for low-income customers of Alliant Energy Corp. who are behind on their utility bills.

“Taken together, these are important steps to provide relief to those suffering from the economic toll the pandemic has spawned,” said Tom Content, executive director of the Citizens Utility Board, Wisconsin’s consumer advocate for residential and small business utility customers.

The pilot program proposed by Alliant Energy’s Wisconsin Power & Light utility would forgive past due balances if low-income customers are able to remain current on their utility bills for 12 straight months.

In [comments to the PSC](#) supporting the proposal, CUB noted, “As our nation’s recently refreshed struggle with racial, social, and economic injustice and inequity has reminded us, many chronically low-income individuals struggle due to societal factors entirely beyond their control. Additionally, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has pushed many into personally uncharted territories of economic hardship. WP&L’s proposal will provide the utility with an additional valuable tool to assist its customers who are struggling the most.”

Other major Wisconsin utilities have some form of forgiveness program for low-income customers.

Approval of the pilot came a day after Congress passed a \$900 billion COVID relief bill that includes \$25 billion for rental assistance, which can be used to pay rent and utility bills that have gone unpaid during the pandemic.

CUB is part of the Customers First Coalition, which last week sent a letter to the Wisconsin congressional delegation asking for funding to aid customers struggling with utility bills.

A separate portion of the bill, which will fund the U.S. government through September, will provide \$638 million nationwide for low-income assistance for customers of water and wastewater utilities.

“The pandemic and recession have made it hard for those struggling to pay for food, let alone their rent and utilities,” Content said. “Targeting help to those who need it makes sense, and the legislation manages to do that, but missed an opportunity for a bigger infusion of assistance for the poor.”

NASUCA, the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates, is the national association of CUBs and state Attorneys General that advocate for residential customers on utility matters. NASUCA sent a letter with other advocates to Congress this month advocating for \$10 billion in emergency funding for low-income home energy assistance across the country.

Unfortunately, Congress failed to include emergency funding for LIHEAP as part of this latest package. The portion of the bill that funds the government is allocating \$3.75 billion to LIHEAP for the fiscal year that ends Sept. 30. That’s an increase of less than 3% from fiscal 2020.

LIHEAP is a federally funded program that helps low-income households with their home energy bills.

Wisconsin has seen more customers apply for energy assistance in 2020 as a result of the recession. The PSC this year took steps to keep utility service from being shut off, enabling customers to keep their lights, heat and water on during the pandemic.

Regarding small businesses, the bill provides new funding for the Paycheck Protection Program and expands the types of nonprofits that are eligible to apply, according to published reports. Local chambers of commerce and other professional associations that are registered as 501(c)6 nonprofits are now eligible.

The Paycheck Protection Program enables small businesses and nonprofits to receive low-interest forgivable loans to offset payroll, rent and utility expenses.

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The Citizens Utility Board is a member-supported, nonprofit organization that advocates for efficient and reliable utility service at the lowest rates possible consistent with sound business principles. CUB represents the interests of Wisconsin's residential, farm, and small business customers of electric and natural gas utilities before the Legislature, state and federal regulatory agencies, and the courts.