



National
Consumer Law
Center



Essential Utility Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond: A Roadmap to Utility Service as a Human Right

March 2021

- Safe, reliable, and affordable energy utility service — including heat, cooling, and light — is an essential human need.
- Safe, reliable, and affordable water and sanitation are essential human needs.
- Reliable, robust, and affordable broadband internet service is an essential human need.
- No household should be disconnected from these essential utility services based on the inability to pay.
- State laws, including those that direct the actions of public utility commissions and municipalities, and cooperatives, should explicitly recognize that uninterrupted utility service is an essential human need and essential to public health and safety.
- Utility service should be affordable for all households. In practice, that requires targeted, effective utility affordability programs sufficient to meet the needs of economically distressed households (such as percentage of income payment plans and/or discount rates).
- Utility billing and collection practices should recognize that uninterrupted utility service is an essential human need. In practice, that requires affordable debt retirement programs and prohibits, at a minimum, the assessment of late payment and reconnection fees, deposits, liens, sale of debt to debt buyers, and other aggressive collection practices.
- Utilities should monitor for and report on disparities in impacts by race and ethnicity on billing, collection, and termination practices, and all services provided, and correct any identified disparities.
- Utilities should provide robust and targeted energy and water efficiency services for economically distressed households.