

Speech presented 19 March 2015 by Abigail Rogers of Jackson County Fuel Committee to the Consumer Protection Committee of the Oregon House of Representatives in support of a moratorium on utility shutoffs

Good afternoon Representative Buckley and committee members. Thank you for inviting us to address your committee. My name is Abigail Rogers, and I am a volunteer with Jackson County Fuel Committee (JCFC), an all-volunteer membership association that for 37 years has built a self-help benefit program of low-income residents joining with students, forestry workers, churches, and businesses to insure that no one has to face a choice between heating and eating.

We thank Representative Buckley for bringing this bill before the committee, giving attention to this crying problem of unaffordable utility rates, and listening to what we have been saying for years. We additionally ask you to amend the bill to extend the moratorium to include all residents of Oregon who are at or below 200% of the poverty level and a waiver of any reconnection fees for low-income residents outside the moratorium period. We call on the legislature to insure that no one else is victimized by the monopolistic actions of the utility companies.

JCFC volunteers advocate for utility customers in southern Oregon who come to us because they cannot afford to pay their bills. I want to give you an example to illustrate just how difficult it is for people to keep their lights and heat on when they earn low wages or have to try to survive on a fixed income.

One of our members came to us this winter in a desperate state because Pacific Power had told her that she owed more than \$2000 and would be shut off within 48 hours if she did not pay her bill. Her husband, who is over 80 years old and suffers from cancer, is dependent on electricity to run his oxygen tank so that he can breathe. Our volunteer advocates had to spend two hours on the phone to Pacific Power just to get an extension, which they were able to secure only after demanding to speak to two supervisors in addition to the representative who initially took the call.

When a customer who is having trouble contacts Pacific Power, the service representative who takes the phone call is given very limited authority by the company to negotiate arrangements, and they generally do not tell the customer that they can appeal to a supervisor. In this particular case, we were successful in getting the company to reduce the amount of money they were demanding, but it was only after a period of several weeks that we were successful in getting the bill paid. Our advocates enlisted the patient's doctor to document his condition. In addition, we recruited churches and service agencies to provide financial support, and the added time enabled our member to put some of her small income toward the bill.

Ultimately we got Pacific Power to cover half the bill through their medical discretionary fund, a resource we have learned of through our advocacy, but the very existence of which is

essentially a company secret. We have spoken to supervisors who have worked as many as thirteen years for Pacific Power and were not aware of it.

The entire process took weeks, involved several volunteers, and was only resolved because of the collective knowledge and experience we possess as an organization. This is not something that the sick, the poor, and the elderly can carry out on their own. These are the kinds of situations in which people can lose their lives because they cannot afford to pay the rising cost of utilities. According to the State Department of Health, nine Oregonians die from cold weather each year.

Moreover, for low-income families who are in subsidized housing, a utility shutoff is grounds for eviction, which means that they lose their housing subsidy permanently. Then, not only are they out on the street, but someone earning \$1000 a month can see their rent jump from \$250 to three or four times that.

The scope of this problem is enormous. Last year, the investor-owned utilities disconnected 71,000 households in the state according to a report released this month by the state's Public Utility Commission. They undertook this report in direct response to our demand almost two years ago for the Commission to enact a moratorium on utility cutoffs for the poorest Oregonians during the winter months. The number of disconnected households represents over 200,000 Oregonians who had their utilities cut off. The price Pacific Power charges for electricity has risen over 60% since 2006, but while rates keep rising, wages and energy assistance are falling.

Last year funding for the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) was only two-thirds of what it was in 2010. According to a report released this month by the state Public Utility Commission, fewer than one out of four Oregonians who qualify for help received any utility assistance last year. This winter the federal government cut the funding for LIHEAP that it provides to Oregon yet again, by an additional \$1.2 million.

According to a recent study by the University of Oregon, women, minorities, and young people are hit especially hard. More than half of the state's African-American workers and nearly half of Latino workers are only paid low wages. Nearly 30% of the state's job openings in 2013 paid \$10 an hour or less.

Oregon is one of only a handful of states that does not protect its own citizens with a winter moratorium. In this respect, we are behind Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Texas.

We support the legislature addressing this critical issue, and, if passed, this bill may improve the situation temporarily but it is just kicking the can down the road. Too many people are left out and it does not address the real problem: the fact that people are shut off because they cannot afford to pay. The sole purpose of these unmanageable rates is only to add to the obscene profits of international monopoly corporations of the energy industry. We call on you to enact a moratorium to include all residents whose income is 200% or less than the federal poverty level. We call on you to waive any reconnection fees for the low income outside the moratorium period. Thank you.