

Testimony of Ashley Luszczki
Opposing L.D. 1962, An Act to Limit Utility Shut Offs
Before the Energy, Utilities and Technology Committee
January 25, 2024

Senator Lawrence, Representative Ziegler and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology: My name is Ashley Luszczki and I am before you today representing the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, a statewide organization consisting of more than 5,000 small and large businesses.

The Chamber believes the intent of LD 1962 - ensuring the continuous provision of electricity and heat to Mainers during extreme temperatures - is a worthy one. However, we are before you today as we feel the current process in place addressing utility shut offs is adequate and that aspects of this legislation would lead to increased costs for ratepayers.

Chapter 815 of the PUC's rules outline specific guidelines and a process for utility shut offs and customer notifications. First, a utility cannot issue a disconnection notice to a customer for failure to pay an overdue bill until at least 30 days after a bill has been mailed. Additionally, if a customer does not pay or make a payment arrangement on an undisputed overdue bill, utilities must provide written notice of their intent to disconnect a minimum of 14 calendar days before the disconnection date for residential customers and at least seven days prior for non-residential customers. Title 35-A also prohibits disconnections from taking place between November 15 and April 15.

Recognizing that Mainers have had to tighten their budget because of inflation, and even still, some continue to face challenges in meeting their bills, we believe utilities are making a good-faith effort to assist customers so that they don't reach the point where a shut off comes into question. From LIAP and LIHEAP that help reduce costs for low-income Mainers to programs like AMP and ELP that help reduce past bills and/or add credit to a bill, there are resources in place, that if utilized can help reduce costs while ensuring bills continue to be met.

The Chamber is also concerned that a provision in the bill will have an unintended consequence, leading to increased costs. Some utilities have embraced technologies to enhance monitoring, activation, and deactivation of services. Section 4, 1-C prohibits a

utility from remotely disconnecting a customer's service, however, unless the utility has made an in-person contact with a customer to discuss disconnection. This will require additional staffing and travel, both of which will be costly. The current process requires written notice in addition to communication by telephone. In instances where a utility can disconnect remotely, two telephone attempts are required.

In closing, the Chamber feels that the Legislature should not over prescribe how the PUC deals with utilities and ratepayer costs. These decisions should be left to the experts, Maine's PUC commissioners, and therefore we are asking the committee vote ought not to pass on L.D. 1962.