

January 12th, 2021

Honorable Mayor and City Council,

The Youth Advisory Council stands in strong support of the Human Rights Commission's propositions to address delinquent utility payments as a result of the ongoing pandemic.

On October 19th, Amira Mckee on behalf of the Youth Advisory Council addressed Council urging a further moratorium on utility shutoffs. Then, on January 5th, Genevieve Harline served as a representative of the Youth Advisory Council at the Human Rights Commission meeting, where they discussed Utility shut-offs with CMCA representatives and outlined their plans to report to the City Council. At the meeting, there was consensus reached on how to balance the City's financial concerns with the needs of Columbia's citizens.

The Youth Advisory Council believes that waiving disconnection and reconnection fees for households that are at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level is key to aiding the most stressed members of our community. By waiving these fees, families will be able to get reconnected sooner and stay safer throughout the pandemic. These charges bury households further in debt before they can begin to pay their bill. This added strain is unduly burdensome to these households especially while the weather is so cold.

We affirm that a moratorium should be extended for households with school-aged children. With online learning and the ongoing pandemic, utilities are crucial for keeping the city's youth safe and in school. Without electricity students are not able to charge their iPads or laptops, preventing them from accessing their education and the resources provided by CPS. With students to return in hybrid or in for a four-day week, water is crucial for sanitation. Washing hands, clothes, and reusable masks all rely on running water to keep youth healthy and protected. Furthermore, shutting off utilities forces people to move into the homes of family or friends, creating larger groups and greater potential for community spread. In order to protect students through this ongoing crisis, the moratorium must be extended.

The Youth Advisory Council also supports the Human Rights Commission's stance that the City should waive the requirement that non-electric utilities be paid first. This policy prevents organizations like CMCA from stepping in and helping households and the City avoid disconnection. By altering this policy, community members will be able to seek assistance when they are in need without unnecessary obstacles.

The Youth Advisory Council also supports increasing awareness and ability to contribute to the CASH and HELP programs to make donations for households that are in the position to be easier and more straightforward. This would help increase assistance to households in need from members in the community.

The ongoing pandemic combined with the harsh winter weather makes rapid action vital for ensuring the safety and success of Columbia's youth and citizens. The Youth Advisory Council urges the Council to thoroughly consider the solutions outlined by the Human Rights Commission.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

City of Columbia Youth Advisory Council