

## **Communication Plan for Reinstating Late Fees on Utility Bills** **City of Columbia Utilities**

In April 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Columbia enacted an emergency order that suspended the issuance of a 3% charge on late payments of utility bills. As of May 29, 2021, the emergency order was rescinded. With this change, City of Columbia Utilities will again assess late-payment fees on past-due utility bills issued after August 1, 2021, in accordance with Chapter 27, Section 19 (f) of the City ordinances.

This document outlines the communications plan that Utilities will use to educate the public about this policy. Utilities will begin public communications the week of June 28 and will push messaging through the end of August.

### **Goals**

1. Inform the public about the reinstatement of late fees being assessed for past-due payments
2. Provide ample time for customers to plan for on-time bill payments
3. Ensure economically challenged households receive complete and accurate information

## **Utilities Services Outreach**

### Press Releases

- The week of June 28, Utilities will publish a press release announcing the reinstatement of late fees
- The week of August 2, Utilities will issue a follow-up press release to coincide with the beginning of the billing cycle

### Social Media

- The Utilities department will post collateral to all of its social media pages throughout the plan period. Messaging will include:
  - Notice of re-establishment of past-due fees
  - Information on where to find assistance with payment of utility bills
  - Details on options for bill payment
  - Directions on how to contact the City with questions

### City Resources

- Utilities will publish an article regarding past-due fees in July's City Source
- Utilities will include information on the policy in the comments section of Utility bills
- Utilities will educate the City's Call Center and Utility Customer Service employees with specific details so they can answer direct questions from the public
- Utilities will provide email messaging via the City's listserv with the Neighborhood Association and the Homeowners Associations
- Utilities will update the City website to reflect the changes in billing

### Area Service Providers, Businesses, and Business Groups

- Utilities will distribute information to area service providers about this policy. Providers may include Central Missouri Community Action, Voluntary Action Center, Columbia Housing Authority, and Columbia/Boone County Department of Public Health & Human Services. Flyers regarding the reinstatement of late fees and where utility assistance may be obtained will be made available to clients of these service providers.
- Utilities will distribute information to local business and business organizations about this policy. Groups may include the Downtown Community Improvement District, The Loop Community Improvement District, Regional Economic Development Inc, and Columbia Chamber of Commerce.

## **Timeline**

### **June**

- Publish initial press release regarding reinstatement of late fees
- Update City website
- Start social media campaign
- Educate City staff about the reinstatement of late fees
  - Call Center, UCS, general employees
- Reach out to area service providers
- Reach out to businesses and business groups

### **July**

- Publish article in City Source regarding late fees
- Print message in comment section in utility bills
- Send emails to HOAs and Neighborhood Associations on listserv
- Continue social media outreach
- Work with area service providers to educate their clients
- Print flyers for distribution in City Hall lobby, UCS and through area service providers

### **August**

- Publish final press release regarding late fees being assessed on bills issued after Aug. 1
- Continue social media outreach
- Print message in comment section in utility bills
- Continue outreach work with area service providers
- Continue outreach work with businesses and business groups