

Dear Columbia City Council,

As the members of the Youth Advisory Council, we feel compelled to put into writing our thoughts and recommendations regarding city utility disconnections and their particular impact on Columbia's youth.

During our October meeting, we were joined by several Columbia Public Schools (CPS) administrators and Board of Education members to discuss issues pertaining to Columbia's students in the context of virtual learning. One of the primary points of discussion was student well-being and health. As virtual learning and COVID-19 precautions create unprecedented challenges for Columbia's students, the City Council bears the responsibility to minimize educational barriers whenever possible. It is clear that utility disconnections both exacerbate existing hardship and obstruct efforts made by CPS to make education more accessible to all students, regardless of their family's income.

As CPS moves forward with virtual learning for middle and high schoolers, access to educational and health resources is largely dependent on access to power. In order to engage in virtual learning, students must be able to charge their CPS issued laptop and have internet access, both of which require consistent power. As more than 40% of CPS students receive or are eligible for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program, utility disconnections could significantly impact these students' ability to receive the education guaranteed to them by Missouri law. Not only could power disconnections make it impossible to engage in virtual classes, but they also render many of CPS Student Services's equity programs ineffective. Most of these programs, including access to CPS issued routers, mental health resources, and education about safety during the pandemic, require that a student and their family have access to power in order to use or find information about these services online. Simply, utility disconnections jeopardize the education of Columbia's youth, exacerbate educational inequities, and make CPS funded resources inaccessible.

Apart from their impact on remote learning, utility services are necessary to protect the health of Columbia as a whole. The Columbia Health Department states that washing your hands is necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The City's mask mandate also requires everyone in public spaces to wear a mask, many of which are homemade and reusable. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that reusable masks must be washed regularly with a cleaning agent and water. To follow these guidelines, all Columbia citizens must have consistent access to water. Disconnecting water for vulnerable community members would reverse progress made in these areas and further harm public health. For youth specifically, water disconnections impede personal hygiene and distract from school participation. Moreover, utility disconnections were originally halted to support community hygiene and prevent the spread of COVID-19. Since its implementation, cases have continued to increase. More than ever, the City Council's efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 must be considerate of the intersection between economic hardship and public health. Utility disconnections would only serve to compromise the work that has been done so far and remove an important public health resource when Columbia's community needs it most.

Thus, we urge that you recognize the increased necessity of utilities in managing the ongoing public health crisis and unprecedented virtual learning conditions, and desist Columbia utility disconnections.

Sincerely,  
Youth Advisory Council