

April 1, 2024

The Honorable Joseph J. Solomon, Jr.
Chairman, House Corporations Committee
Rhode Island State House
Providence, Rhode Island 02908

RE: H-7286 – Relating to Public Utilities & Carriers – Percentage of Income Payment Program

Dear Chairman Solomon:

On behalf of Rhode Island Energy, I write regarding H-7286, which would authorize the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) to approve a tiered percentage of income payment program (PIPP) for electric and natural gas customers. Our company is committed to working with policymakers, regulators, and other valued stakeholders to explore viable policy and regulatory pathways that support energy affordability for all customers.

Rhode Island Energy appreciates the leadership shown by Representative Slater and community advocates in seeking ways to help utility customers better manage their energy cost burdens. This is a value important to our company, too. Today, Rhode Island Energy supports its customers through assistance programs that include a residential discount rate, arrearage management, and energy efficiency.¹ We also connect our customers to other federal, state, and community-run programs that offer direct utility bill relief. This suite of offerings, along with other available assistance opportunities, are intended to increase energy affordability for those customers who need it most.²

For a payment assistance construct such as the one proposed here to be successful, it is important to consider any incremental programmatic and administrative costs and systems impacts that may be incurred and ensure alignment with other existing assistance efforts. Such an approach must be mindful not only of our most vulnerable customers, but of all other utility customers, too.

Rhode Island Energy notes two important factors that are critical to further consideration of PIPP legislation this session: a) the company is now working to transition all its billing systems from the previous electric and natural gas utility – an effort that will not be completed until later this year, and b) the company intends to submit its next general rate filing to the PUC in 2026. It is critical that both factors be accommodated should this legislation advance. Alignment with the company's next rate case is particularly important such that Rhode Island Energy, state utility regulators, and other valued stakeholders can more holistically account for rate impacts, effects on other programs and investments, and other factors (e.g., administrative costs, necessary billing system changes, etc.).

¹ As noted, Rhode Island Energy implements/facilitates several important programs available to income-eligible customers, such as 25-30% bill discounts, an Arrears Management Program, budget and balanced billing, LIHEAP Enhancement Fund collections, and energy efficiency services offered at no-cost for qualified customers.

² Rhode Island Energy also hosts Customer Assistance Expos in local communities, which provide a "one-stop shop" for customers seeking utility and other types of assistance from partner organizations, such as the United Way and DHS. Our next expos will be held on Monday, April 8th from 2:00–6:00 PM at the Riverside (East Providence) Public Library and on Monday, May 13th from 2:00 – 6:00 PM at the West Warwick Senior Center.

Nicholas S. Ucci
Director of Government Affairs
Rhode Island Energy

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Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "NSU".

Nicholas S. Ucci
Director of Government Affairs

CC: The Honorable Members of the House Corporations Committee
Deputy Majority Leader Scott A. Slater, Lead Sponsor