

Written Testimony in favor of House Bill No. 7715: AN ACT RELATING TO PUBLIC UTILITIES AND CARRIERS -- TERMINATION OF SERVICE TO PERSONS WHO ARE DISABLED, SERIOUSLY ILL, OR IN ARREARS OF PAYMENT {LC5264/1}

To: The Honorable Members of the House Committee on Corporations.

From: Aaron Isaac, MPA, Policy Analyst for the George Wiley Center

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House Bill 7715 is necessary to pass to protect seriously ill Rhode Islanders from unnecessary utility terminations.

Rhode Island has the weakest utility protections for seriously ill customers in New England. Massachusetts and New Hampshire protect a seriously ill patient from shut off for a minimum of three (3) months and Connecticut allows a doctor to determine the length of the protection. Rhode Island currently only allows for a three (3) week protection before the patient must reapply or appeal to the Public Utility Commission.

The issue requires action now because in October of 2023 over 5,500 accounts were stripped of their seriously ill status. As of February 2024, only 99 accounts were considered seriously ill. The effect has been a move toward the Handicapped/Disabled Protection which protects a customer for a year (Chat 1). However, the requirements for the Handicapped Protection are higher than the seriously ill and may not be appropriate for the customer's needs. Some people will not need the protection year round, but need more than three weeks. As the rise in Handicapped Protections suggests (from 744 in September 2023 to 1,811 in February 2024), people are more likely to take the Handicapped Protection despite not needing yearly protections.

HB 7715 provides a more flexible and less onerous system that allows doctors to determine the length of the illness and the protection. This way, a customer who needs a six (6) month protection need only fill out the paperwork once and may renew it if needed. Additionally, those with terminal and chronic conditions need only fill out the paperwork once. The current system entails unnecessary bureaucratic red tape that the seriously ill find difficult to navigate through. Making the process less of a burden on patients, doctors, and RI Energy will go a long way toward protecting the seriously ill of Rhode Island.

Please send HB 7715 in for a vote.

Aaron Isaac

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