

April 2, 2024

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

RE: H-7715 – Relating to Public Utilities & Carriers – Termination of Service

Dear Chairman Solomon:

On behalf of Rhode Island Energy, I write in **opposition** to H-7715, which seeks to amend General Laws pertaining to the determination of persons subject to nontermination of utility services. Our company respectfully requests that this bill be held for further study.

Rhode Island Energy has several concerns with this legislation. First, it would extend – to a significant degree – the nontermination period for persons who are seriously ill. This would shift the delicate balance now in place between the need to protect our most vulnerable customers and ensuring that all other utility customers are not unduly burdened by rising costs associated with uncollectable debts. It is why our General Laws provide utility customers with the right to request a review of their circumstances with state regulators (pursuant to rules and regulations) after a reasonable period of time extending beyond written certification of an illness. To emphasize this point, those qualifying as seriously ill now have three weeks' protection with the opportunity to extend this time frame through a request to state regulators. Extending this protection to three months is arbitrary and unnecessary given the safety net already in place with the ability to request an extension.

Second, Rhode Island Energy notes the following:

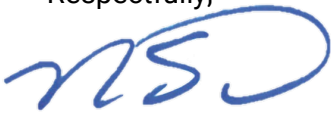
- Page 2, lines 2-3 establish the termination date to be “the last day of the period specified by the physician as the duration of the illness.” The termination date cannot be the same date as the last day of the illness duration. Should this legislation advance, we recommend revising the sentence to read as follows: “The termination date shall be no earlier than the day after the last day of the period specified by the physician as the duration of the illness.”
- Page 2, lines 3-6 insulates physicians in a manner that ultimately shifts cost risks onto non-protected customers. Physicians should be required to state the anticipated length of illness when known; “failing to specify” does not seem to be a reasonable excuse to extend the nontermination period out several months by default. To the extent a physician cannot ascertain the length of illness – for any reason – it is prudent to retain the existing three-week duration while still allowing for a case-by-case review by state regulators.

Finally, please note that the final resolution of a Rhode Island Superior Court case involving the Center for Justice that was pending for eight years¹ addresses the issue at hand through a consent agreement, namely, the treatment of seriously ill customers from termination of utility service. Importantly, Rhode Island Energy has already updated its customer service system to account for the Court's consent order. If this legislation were to advance, Rhode Island Energy would need time – and a substantial allocation of resources – to implement necessary billing system changes. Respectfully, any legislation would need to account for that implementation period² and provide for the recovery of prudently incurred costs.

In closing, Rhode Island Energy respectfully asks this Committee to oppose H-7715.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

Respectfully,



Nicholas S. Ucci
Director of Government Affairs

CC: The Honorable Members of the House Corporations Committee
Representative Cherie L. Cruz, Lead Sponsor

¹ Rhode Island Superior Court, No. PC-15-4214. Ref.: Agreement and Consent Order filed August 7, 2023.

² Please note that Rhode Island Energy is actively working to transition its customer service and billing systems from the previous utility – a process that is anticipated to last into late-summer. Once that work is complete, there will be a need to “freeze” implementation of new system functionalities for a period, followed by time to design, test, and implement any system changes driven by new statutory mandates. In sum, it could be a year before Rhode Island Energy would be able to fully implement the changes proposed by this legislation.