

May 13, 2020



**FROM THE DESK OF
COMMISSIONER
BRENT BAILEY
CENTRAL DISTRICT OFFICE**



The Central District is pleased to bring you the latest information concerning utility rates, project developments, Public Service Commission actions and other news you can use. I hope you will find this information to be a useful resource to learn about the Public Service Commission, consumer issues and the continuous work we are doing for the citizens in the Central District and across the state of Mississippi. Thank you again for allowing me to serve you in this capacity.

Brent Bailey

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Protecting Customers and Maintaining Utility Service During the COVID-19 Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has closed schools, shuttered many businesses, and drove hundreds of thousands of Mississippians to shelter in place. While many were able to work from home, there were many more that were furloughed and unable to work. Recognizing that many families and individuals would undergo financial hardship due to reduced or halted incomes in the coming weeks, the Mississippi Public Service Commission **voted on March 15 to temporarily suspend disconnections** of certain utility services to protect public health and welfare.

The current March 15 order is set to expire at the close of business on May 14. The Commission is aware of the continued threat posed by COVID-19 and that access to utility services is necessary to maintain a safe and healthy home environment. However, the Commission also felt that while the public health emergency continues, public utilities must get on a path to resume normal operations as Mississippi businesses begin to reopen. Therefore, the Commission **voted to extend** the temporary suspension order until 5 pm on May 26, 2020.

Behind on your Bills? Take Action Now!

This short-term extension of the disconnection suspension order should be seen as a transition period for consumers and utilities to work together to find agreeable solutions to getting any unpaid utility bills current in a timely manner. Customers are still responsible for paying for any utility services rendered during the suspension. We implore customers to immediately take action and contact their utility companies to avoid disruption to their services following the expiration of this extension.

Virtually all utilities are well aware of the economic disruption to many households caused by the COVID-19 outbreak and the need to maintain access to fundamental utilities such as water, sewer, electric and natural gas. Many utilities have developed one or more payment assistance options for those customers that have accrued outstanding balances or are having difficulty paying their utility bills due to the pandemic. These options are designed to provide flexibility and support to customers with outstanding balances.



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Some examples of programs and payment options that utilities may offer to help customers reduce utility debt include:

- Spreading overdue balances across two or more months with partial payment of past due amount.
- Moving overdue balances to a level billing program that provides bill amount certainty over a set timeframe.
- Waiver of any accrued late fees with full or nearly full payment of outstanding bill amount.
- Apply any existing deposits held by the utility for the customer to the past due amount. The deposit could be recouped as a line-item to the customer's bill or the customer can be put on another billing program (such as pre-pay) if available.

This is not an exhaustive list of payment options and each utility is encouraged by the Commission to offer reasonable payment plans to customers who have past-due bills. Utilities will likely be ramping up its customer outreach through letters, emails, calls or visits to provide information on how to access payment assistance options. If you or a family member or friend have an outstanding utility bill, the Commission urges you to first reach out to that utility and come to terms on a workable payment solution. If an agreeable solution can not be reached, the Commission will take steps to assist you in the negotiations.

The Commission will soon be establishing a portal on its website that will contain links and information on any state and federal financial assistance programs and information on the payment assistance programs being offered by utilities for the benefit of customers. Please watch our [website](#) for the posting of this information next week. Or call the Customer Service number found on most any utility bill for assistance.

Keeping Decisions Local

The Mississippi Public Service Commission has sent a letter to the full Mississippi congressional delegation expressing our concerns with recent congressional proposals to impose federally mandated debt collection requirements and a blanket service disconnection moratorium on utilities regulated by state public service commissions. We believe that a federal "one-size-fits-all" approach will severely restrict or eliminate the ability of state commissions and utilities to work with customers on acceptable payment plans. Furthermore, state commissions are in the best position to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting local customers and to foster constructive relationships between utilities and customers in ways unique to each state. We urge Congress to reject proposals that would preempt or intrude upon the jurisdiction of state public service commissions to continue regulating utility retail service issues in the best interests of their own state's utility customers.



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Recognizing our Healthcare Heroes

The Central District joined Atmos Energy and Newk's in showing our appreciation for our frontline medical professionals. In recognition of National Nurses Week, Atmos Energy and Newk's provided approximately 2900 meals to our healthcare heroes at 19 hospitals in Mississippi. I was able to connect with Atmos Energy and Newk's personnel to help deliver over 100 meals to the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson. Medical professionals across the state have worked tirelessly to treat those impacted by the coronavirus while also trying to protect themselves and their loved ones.



Thank you to all frontline medical workers across Mississippi!





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Last Week at the MPSC

At its May 12 Regular Meeting, the Commission approved Entergy Mississippi's proposed [Interim Adjustment to the Energy Cost Recovery Factor](#) that resulted in a decrease of \$9.71 per month for a typical residential customer using 1000 kWh/month. The reduced rate will be in effect for four months beginning with the June 2020 bills.

Also at its May 12 Regular Meeting, the Commission formally [adopted its Amendments to Practice Rule 28](#) that implements changes to the Mississippi Telephone Solicitation Act and the Mississippi Caller ID Anti-Spoofing Act arising from the 2019 legislative session.

Electric power associations continue to file their Annual Compliance Reports to the Commission under Docket No. 2014-AD-246.

Atmos Energy Filed its [March 2020 Performance Base Rate Mechanism Report](#) (Confidential), [Asset Management Monthly Report](#) (Confidential), and [Monthly Hedge Reports](#).

City of Clinton filed an [Amended Formal Billing and Service Complaint](#) against Entergy Mississippi LLC in regards to monthly fees for street lighting, poles, etc.



Last week, our Consumer Complaint Specialists handled a total of **39** complaints in the Central District.

Electric Companies	19
Telecommunications	16
Water/Sewage	3
Natural Gas	1

Last week, the Central District received a total of **129** complaints from consumers against potential telemarketers through our no call app, website and mail-ins. The top three general issues reported by consumers are related to insurance, credit cards and auto warranties.

The [Federal Trade Commission](#) recently reported on scammers using COVID-19 messages to scam people. Scammers might call to offer things like a "COVID-19 kit," "Coronavirus package," or Medicare benefits related to the virus. But they'll ask you to verify personal information like your bank account, Social Security, or Medicare numbers. If you get a call from someone who says they're a Medicare representative and they ask for this information, hang up. It's a scam, not Medicare calling. To hear what one scammy Medicare call sounds like and for more tips on how to protect yourself against this type of scam as well as the latest Corona virus related scams seen by the FTC, visit: https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/blog/2020/04/scammers-are-using-covid-19-messages-scam-people?utm_source=govdelivery

We encourage consumers to file telemarketing complaints with the Federal Trade Commission at <http://www.donotcall.gov/> in addition to filing complaints with the Mississippi Public Service Commission.