

Talking Points and Answers to Common Arguments against the Customer Relations Bill

Opposition: This is a way for people to cheat the system and we need to hold them accountable--

Answer: People are held accountable. This isn't a debt amnesty program. When the moratorium is over people have to pay up or get shut off. And the utilities have never proven that people are gaming the system. The group of people who are qualified for the program is very limited.

Opposition: This is a bad idea because it allows people to build up huge debts and then get shut off as soon as the moratorium is over--

Answer: It's true that people can build up big debts over the winter and have trouble paying them off, and that is a problem. We need to find ways to solve that problem. But shutting the power off on a vulnerable family in the winter is not the solution. The solution is to find a way to help people pay the bills. Our ideas: a USB plan, improved LIHEAP, winterization to bring down bills, etc..

Opposition: The utilities can't afford it—

Answer: If we have ways to help people pay the bills, like a USB, the utilities won't have to write off bad debt.

Low income families can't afford it. Utilities can work with us to find ways to make the system work for them and poor families. Not doing anything is not a solution.

Opposition: There should be a requirement that people make a winter payment of one half their average bills to remain in the moratorium program—

Answer: The point of the moratorium is to protect really vulnerable people regardless of their ability to pay. Setting up payment plans can help people stay ahead of the debt, so offering them is good. It's pointless to make them mandatory, though, because then the moratorium offers no protection.

Opposition: This isn't the normal way to change agency rules.

Answer: Every law requires some agency to promulgate rules based on the law. If rules exist relating to the issue, that bill requires rule changes. There is no difference between this bill and any other that requires rule changes.

Opposition: These changes should be made through the rulemaking process and the PUC, because it's the PUC's job.

Answer: The PUC does a good job of making rules, but the PUC's role is to make rules that carry out the Legislature's intent. The Legislature does have a responsibility to tell the PUC what the rules should look like.

Opposition: But the Legislature delegated this to the PUC completely, and has never tinkered with the PUC's rules.

Answer: The Legislature hasn't spoken about the content of the rules before, but that doesn't mean it gave up the ability to do it. The PUC made the rules, and the Legislature has had time now to decide how they should be changed.

Opposition: The Legislature gets to approve all the rules the PUC makes. They should just wait for the PUC to send rules about this and then make changes.

Answer: The Legislature can approve or change rules before they become effective, but that doesn't take away their power, and their responsibility, to give the PUC guidance.