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Connecting immigrants, employers,
and communities

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Silvan B. Lutkewitte, III, Chairman
Independent Regulatory Review Commission
333 Market Street, 14th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17101

Robert F. Powelson, Chairman
Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission
Commonwealth Keystone Building
400 North Street
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Re: IRRC # 2743, PUC Docket #L-0060182

Dear Chairman Lutkewitte and Chairman Powelson:

On behalf of the Pennsylvanians we serve, we urge you to adopt provisions in the final regulation entitled "Standards and Billing Practices for Residential Utility Services," that establish basic communication responsibilities of utility companies when contacting their limited English proficient customers.

As an economic development organization, the Welcoming Center is keenly aware of the important role that immigrants and people with limited English proficiency play in our state's economy. Every year, we serve more than 800 legal, work-authorized individuals who have chosen our Commonwealth as the place to build their careers, launch their small businesses and raise their families.

Pennsylvania badly needs the energy, talent and revenue represented by these workers and entrepreneurs. **Your actions will establish a critical safeguard to ensure that they receive the same consumer protections as other Pennsylvanians.** We know that families are often confused and overwhelmed by the cascade of communications they receive from utility companies. Ensuring that they can obtain information about utility service termination, rate changes, and other vital changes *in a language they can understand* is crucial.

We applaud the Pennsylvania Utility Commission's initial statement that oral and written information should be communicated in the non-English languages of customers when a significant population using that language lives in the public utility's service territory. We were dismayed to learn that the most recent version of the regulation deleted this fundamental requirement. Given the increasing diversity of our Commonwealth and the rise in LEP utility customers, we strongly recommend amendments to the regulations at § 56.91 (b)(17) and §56.331(b)(13) to incorporate a requirement for communication in languages other than English and Spanish and a reasonable definition of "significant population":

Information in Spanish, directing Spanish-speaking customers to the numbers to call for information and translation assistance. Similar information shall be included in other languages when census data indicates a significant population using that language resides in the public utility's service territory. A SIGNIFICANT POPULATION CONSTITUTES 5% OF PERSONS ELIGIBLE TO BE SERVED OR 1,000 MEMBERS OF THE LANGUAGE GROUP, WHICHEVER IS LESS.

Sections 56.201 and 56.431, regarding billing information, should also be amended:

... A public utility which serves a substantial number of Spanish-speaking [ratepayers] customers shall provide billing information in English, [and] in Spanish, **AND IN OTHER LANGUAGES WHEN CENSUS DATA INDICATES THAT A SIGNIFICANT POPULATION USING THE PARTICULAR LANGUAGE RESIDES IN THE PUBLIC UTILITY'S SERVICE TERRITORY. A SIGNIFICANT POPULATION CONSTITUTES 5% OF PERSONS ELIGIBLE TO BE SERVED OR 1,000 MEMBERS OF THE LANGUAGE GROUP, WHICHEVER IS LESS.**

In addition, § 56.93 and § 56.333, which describe utility employees' personal contact with customers, should be amended to require the personal contact, whether in person or by phone, be in the primary language of the customer. If utilities do not employ bilingual staff who speak the languages that meet the above standard, competent telephonic and in-person interpreter services are readily available.

We urge the Independent Regulatory Review Commission and the Pennsylvania Utility Commission to recognize the legal and practical importance of requiring regulated utility companies to take reasonable steps to ensure meaningful access to basic utility services. For a public utility that receives any form of federal financial assistance, not taking reasonable steps to ensure meaningful access could constitute a violation of the anti-discrimination provisions of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as described in the U.S. Department of Energy's policy guidance on nondiscrimination in federally assisted programs.

Communicating with customers in their language also makes good business sense because of the effectiveness and efficiency of using competent language resources. Customers will better understand their obligations, utility companies will be better prepared to convey important information, and problems can be resolved more easily when each party understands what the other is saying. Similarly, it is critically important that documents containing information about legal rights, especially related to the termination of service, be translated into languages that meet the threshold described above.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,



Anne O'Callaghan
President and CEO

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