



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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Coalition of Consumer Rights, Environmental, Community-Based Groups Propose the People’s Utility Rate Relief Act

Springfield, Ill. — A coalition of Chicago, statewide and national organizations focused on consumer rights, environmental justice, energy and the environment are joining forces to push for legislation to improve affordability of utility service in response to decades of Illinois utility rate increases with no end in sight. The People’s Utility Rate Relief Act (PURR Act, HB 2172) will protect the interests of Illinois consumers and keep families safe by minimizing disconnections of essential utility services and requiring the Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC) to specifically assess affordability in all of its decisions. Its chief sponsor is State Rep. Will Davis, D-Hazel Crest. The Bill is the product of the Campaign to End Energy Poverty sponsored by Blacks in Green (BIG™) which held an inaugural campaign retreat at BIG’s Woodlawn headquarters in July 2022.

The proposing coalition is led by BIG’s lobbying affiliate Green Power Alliance and the National Consumer Law Center (NCLC), with the support of:

- Chicago Environmental Justice Network (CEJN)
- Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)
- Environmental Defense Fund (EDF)
- Faith in Place
- Illinois Association of Community Action Agencies (IACAA)
- Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition (ICJC)
- Illinois Environmental Council (IEC)
- Little Village Environmental Justice Organization [LVEJO]
- Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)
- Sierra Club Illinois
- Woodstock Institute

“Record utility profits, record shutoff threats, record customer debt and record utility rate increases - this is the crisis facing millions of Illinois customers struggling to pay for heat and light and we need policy makers to act now to protect them from losing these essential services,” said Naomi Davis, founder and CEO of Blacks in Green. “Our PURR Act is sensible and fair – making sure customers get the assistance they need to keep monthly bills affordable and requiring utilities to assist customers in accessing programs—including energy efficiency programs—needed for them to remain connected to light and heat and reap savings and comfort from energy programs paid for on their monthly bills. Our utilities are investor-owned monopolies franchised to provide life-essential services. We must not perpetuate disparate and cumulative harms that impact financially-struggling families—particularly families of color—being asked to finance programs they can’t use, or live without heat or electricity because they can’t afford it.”

“After the monumental passage of CEJA to put Illinois on a carbon-free path, we now need to address affordability so working-class families aren’t taken advantage of,” said State Rep. Will Davis. “The PURR Act gets to the root of our energy problem rather than offering a bandaid. Then we can make the right adjustments in the regulation of our utility companies so consumers have a fairer shot.”

To address energy poverty, the PURR Act includes the following new utility and regulatory requirements:

- Provides qualified financially-struggling customers a discounted rate
- Provides new protections from disconnection for medically and financially vulnerable households due to inability to pay
- Reduces high default rates on deferred payment agreements (DPAs) by making them more affordable and reasonably structured
- Requires utilities to dedicate more of existing energy efficiency budgets to low-income weatherization efforts
- Halts disconnections of pending applicants for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)
- Incorporates a heat index assessment in the summertime disconnection prohibition to halt disconnections of utility customers during high humidity and heat advisories
- Halts electric and gas utilities’ current practice of accelerating disconnections of customers deemed at higher risk for nonpayment based on a black-box algorithm scoring system
- Memorializes in statute now voluntary wintertime prohibitions on disconnection from December 1 through March 31
- Requires the ICC to incorporate affordability assessments in all decisions impacting customer rates
- Requires ICC assessment of credit and collection procedures to halt disproportionate impacts on certain communities

The current system of utility regulation does not prioritize affordability. Continually increasing customer rates and adding clean energy programs without solving for affordability is simply not sustainable, PURR Act proponents argue.

According to new utility requests filed with the ICC in January, with decisions coming from the ICC by the end of 2023:

- ComEd filed to increase rates by \$1.5 billion over the next four years, a \$17 per month increase for the average customer by 2024;
- Ameren Electric filed for a nearly half-billion rate increase over the next four years;
- Ameren Gas filed to increase its rates by another \$135 million, estimated to cost customers another \$6.68 per month;
- Nicor Gas’s rates have already increased 77 percent since 2018, with a record-breaking \$321 million increase now pending before the ICC, which would increase monthly bills by more than \$9 per month for the average customer;

- Peoples Gas requested a \$402 million rate increase in its latest filings, a monthly bill increase of about \$12 per month; meanwhile 20 percent of their customers are already behind on their bills to the tune of \$100 million.

“Over the past decade, Illinois electric and gas utility rates have skyrocketed, with no relief in sight given existing regulatory law and the utilities’ most recent rate filings,” said Karen Lusson, senior attorney with the National Consumer Law Center and manager of NCLC’s Project Stay Connected – Illinois. “Monthly zip code-level data shows that communities of color in particular have been disproportionately impacted by utility disconnection policies. We need policymakers to protect the interests of financially struggling families across the State and enact the necessary protections included in the PURR Act to ensure that essential utility service is affordable and available to *all* Illinois households, including the most financially and medically vulnerable.”

"Communities of color are disproportionately impacted by climate change and the increasingly high cost of energy due to our dependence on dirty fuels," said Jack Darin, Director of Sierra Club Illinois. "Sierra Club supports this legislation, which will protect ratepayers and ensure their voices are included in utility regulation. This is the next critical step forward in delivering a just future for our climate and communities."

“Black and brown households, including Latine households and those of many other communities, are disproportionately impacted by utility service disconnections. Environmental racism is also carried out through excessive economic barriers to accessing basic resources like energy that are essential for families’ survival, health and comfort—and increasing rates on these families already struggling to make ends meet would only add to their burdens,” said Juliana Pino, Policy Director of the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization. “We support this bill because it will have a direct effect on keeping energy affordable for the most impacted families in Chicago and throughout the state.”

“Families across the State are forced to make difficult decisions each month as to which life essentials—like food or medicine—they’ll have to forego because of unaffordable utility bills,” said Rosazlia Grillier, Co-Chair, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) Board of Trustees, Co-President Emeritus, POWER-PAC IL and Governing Council Leader, United Parent Leaders Action Network. “When utility companies turn off people’s electricity or heat, they are putting that person or family at risk. This is not only an issue of consumer rights but also one of public health and family safety.”

Legislators are considering the merits of the PURR Act this spring during the current legislative session, scheduled to end May 19.

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About Blacks in Green & Green Power Alliance

Blacks in Green (BIG™) is an environmental justice and economic development non-profit organization based in the Historic West Woodlawn community of Chicago, Illinois. BIG is the creator of the Sustainable Square Mile™, considered the gold standard for Black community economic development, where African American families walk-to-work, walk-to-shop, walk-to-learn, walk-to-play, own the businesses, own the land and live the conservation lifestyle. BIG teaches neighbors to be their own emergency management system in the Age of Climate Crisis



by building green, self-sustaining, mixed-income, walkable-villages with economies in energy, horticulture, housing, tourism and waste. Green Power Alliance is its lobbying affiliate. Learn more at www.blacksingreen.org

About NCLC

Since 1969, the nonprofit [National Consumer Law Center® \(NCLC®\)](#) has worked for consumer justice and economic security for low-income and other disadvantaged people in the U.S. through its expertise in policy analysis and advocacy, publications, litigation, expert witness services and training.

MEDIA CONTACT:

Sean Anderson

Sean@apsandassociates.com