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## **Kuster, Welch Introduce Bill to Provide \$10 Billion in Utility Debt Relief**

*\*\*The full legislation can be found [HERE](#)\*\**

**Washington, D.C.** — Yesterday, Rep. Annie Kuster (NH-02) and Rep. Peter Welch (VT-AL) introduced legislation to provide \$10 billion in utility debt relief for Americans struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The [Energy Debt Relief for American Families Act](#) would provide urgently-needed relief to states through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) to pay down utility bills in arrears for individuals experiencing economic distress due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Millions of Americans cannot afford their energy bills because of COVID-19. The National Energy Assistance Directors' Association (NEADA) [estimates that 15 to 20 percent](#) of residential customers are at least 60 days behind on their electric and natural gas bills. As temporary, state-mandated moratoriums on utility shut-offs expire around the country, families will lose access to electricity and heating — leaving them without the essential utilities they need during this public health crisis.

“Even before COVID-19 hit, many families in the Granite State and across the country struggled to pay their utility bills,” **said Rep. Kuster**. “The coronavirus pandemic has put additional financial stress on many households, creating a more widespread challenge during the cold winter months. We cannot let our most vulnerable citizens go without the essential utilities they need during this public health crisis. That’s why I introduced the *Energy Debt Relief for American Families Act*, to help families stay connected to the services they need while preventing other ratepayers from ultimately paying off their debt. This legislation will provide crucial relief to those who need it. I urge my colleagues to support this beneficial bill.”

“In the middle of a long, dark winter, the coronavirus pandemic continues to squeeze family budgets across the country, forcing some to choose between paying their bills or putting food on the table,” **said Rep. Welch**. “This bill will provide immediate relief to help vulnerable Americans pay off their utility bills, making sure that they stay warm and connected to the services that they need.”

“The National Energy Assistance Directors’ Association, representing the state directors of the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, strongly supports Rep. Kuster’s bill,” **said Mark Wolfe, Executive Director of the National Energy Assistance Directors’ Association**. “Millions of families have fallen behind on their utility bills as a result of losing their jobs or having their work hours reduced due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Rep. Kuster’s proposal will provide support for 10 million of these families in need to get out of debt and avoid burdensome repayment plans or the potential shut-off of power.”

“Congresswoman Kuster’s leadership will make a real difference for American families who are struggling to pay their bills during this unprecedented crisis,” said **Susan Fleck, President of Liberty Utilities New Hampshire**. “Like many utilities, Liberty is working closely with our customers to make alternative payment arrangements and help them stay connected to the energy service they depend upon, but many are still struggling to afford this basic necessity. We urge swift consideration by Congress and its inclusion in any COVID relief measure that is considered.”

“Granite Staters that have been impacted by COVID-19 are struggling to pay bills, and many of them have not been in the position of having to ask for help before,” said **Jeanne Agri, Executive Director of the Community Action Program, Belknap-Merrimack Inc.** “Paying Utility arrears would provide a huge benefit to those people who are struggling and need the support right now.”

“Our members are reporting record numbers of households in arrears with balances that are becoming insurmountable,” said **Bonnie Biocchi, Executive Director of the Northeast Public Power Association (NEPPA)**. “Rep. Kuster’s bill will provide targeted relief to those who need it most, and will also prevent the problem from becoming worse due to mounting losses at the utility level. NEPPA commends the Congresswoman for taking a thoughtful and much-needed approach to this issue.”

The *Energy Debt Relief for American Families Act* would help address the utility debt crisis by providing \$10 billion to states through the LIHEAP to pay off residential utility bills for households that certify they cannot pay their bills because of economic distress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This legislation would stop utility companies from being forced to either push the cost of “bad debt” to the rest of their customer base in the form of higher rates or cutbacks on assistance to struggling customers.

Since the coronavirus pandemic hit in early 2020, [Rep. Kuster has long advocated](#) for the need to provide additional federal resources to cash-strapped states and towns that have experienced depressed revenues as a result of the economic downturn. Last Congress, Kuster helped introduce legislation that would extend federal unemployment compensation to prevent millions of Americans from falling into poverty.