

December 22, 2020

Mayor Jim Strickland
City of Memphis
via email

President J.T. Young
Chief Executive Officer
Memphis Light, Gas & Water

Memphis City Council Members
MLGW Board of Directors

Dear Mayor Strickland and Mr. Young,

With the holiday season upon us, **we ask you to immediately re-institute the moratorium on utility shutoffs as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage.** We wrote to you earlier this year in a joint letter from Friends of the Earth, Black Lives Matter Memphis, Fox Meadows Neighborhood Association, and Oasis of Hope urging the city and Memphis Light, Gas and Water to re-institute the moratorium. Thank you for giving Memphians a temporary reprieve from utility shutoffs amidst the pandemic.

As coronavirus cases spike in Tennessee to record highs, it is imperative that Memphis residents keep water flowing and heat running this winter. In addition to Memphis already facing one of the highest energy burdens (percent of income spent on monthly utilities) of any major metro city in the country, recently it was noted Tennessee has the highest infection rate for Covid-19. The job layoffs, reduced hours, and lost income resulting from the pandemic make it even more difficult for many Memphis families and individuals to pay for basic necessities like medicine, food, and utilities.

Denying those same families water to wash their hands during a pandemic in which one of the first and best defenses to infection is to frequently wash one's hands is irresponsible. Likewise, not allowing affected citizens to use their toilets, to bathe, or to heat their homes to stay warm in the depths of winter will only further exacerbate a public health emergency and an economic crisis.

According to [Energy Democracy](#), "Tennessee's 211 data shows that the number of calls for utility bill assistance since March 1, 2020, are 63% higher than the same period in 2019." Most past-due families and individuals do not currently have the ability to pay off their bills, with the average residential customer owing around \$600.

As we wait for the widespread availability of a vaccine, the number of COVID cases and deaths is projected to continue to climb. Memphis and Shelby County cannot afford to make the situation worse by cutting off basic utilities to tens of thousands of residents during this time.

Black and Brown communities continue to bear the brunt of both the health and economic impacts of this pandemic. As you are aware, these communities are experiencing higher rates of economic loss, infection, and death. Utility shutoffs by MLGW will further disproportionately impact Black and Brown communities who suffer from poverty at greater rates than white communities in Tennessee.

We urge MLGW to immediately reinstate the shutoff moratorium. Moreover, for the future of Memphis and the region, we call on the city and MLGW to ensure energy security for all Memphians by instituting ambitious energy conservation programs for low-income residents and leaving TVA for cheaper, cleaner wholesale electricity.

Sincerely,

Herman Morris, Jr.
Former MLGW CEO

Erich Pica
President, Friends of the Earth

David Upton
Memphis Resident Activist