

A [recent VA Mercury story](#) quoted “the late Del. A. Victor Thomas, D-Roanoke County, who said ‘Y’all, we’re eating our seed corn.’ He would admonish colleagues on the House Appropriations Committee when they considered shortchanging priorities dear to him, particularly public schools, environmental stewardship and Virginia’s youth.” His words resonate today.

The article describes the economic challenges Virginia’s young people have “to keep their heads above water.... Households prioritizing monthly bills — like which ones must be paid now and which will have to wait a month – or two, or three” are all over the state. The 30-something college graduate working in a grocery store pointed out: “You do what you have to [do] to keep the utilities on, and sometimes one of them will slip.... “I’ve had more disconnections than I can count. I’ve had, I’d say, five or six times I’ve had the electricity cut off....”

This young woman’s situation is one of the reasons that you need to approve HB 664. But she is not unique and, sadly, not even the most vulnerable of Virginians who experience utility disconnections. Virginia currently has among the weakest utility disconnection protections for customers of any state in the southeast – including for customers who are medically vulnerable. The existing regulations for these medically vulnerable households are over a decade old and badly need updated. The pandemic has clearly demonstrated this need.

It is critical to provide life-saving support for community members like the elderly, infants, and those who have medical conditions and/or disabilities. This bill protects access to essential utility services – water and power – for people who are socially and medically vulnerable.

So many of our neighbors most impacted and financially burdened by utility bills are those in low-income families and communities of color. Black households are the most impacted by energy burdens and utility hardship—Black households are three times more likely to experience a utility service shut-off than non-blacks (15% versus 4%). This bill expands protections for families financially burdened by utility bills in times of crisis.

All this has very personal resonance for me. I am the sister of a 40+ year seriously chronically mentally ill brother, age 63, and the grandmother of a now-28 grandson with Fragile X syndrome (part of the autism spectrum). Fortunately, they enjoy family support that prevents utility disconnections. My brother’s now-deceased parents were able to leave funds so his siblings can keep his housing stable and provide for his other needs. Those funds ensure his utility bills are paid, even when he is acutely psychotic and/or hospitalized. I have been able to assist my grandson’s mother whenever she has had difficulties paying her bills.

But not everybody enjoys this level of support. HB 664 is intended to assist those who need time to sort out their many challenges. This is a need that transcends party lines. Who are these people?

- ✓ Parents of autistic children who need electricity to access computer programs to help them interact with the world;
- ✓ Family members of those who are paralyzed or otherwise severely handicapped and dependent on electricity to help them breathe or move around;

- ✓ Families with elderly, severely handicapped, or infant members who need adequate heat and/or air conditioning to thrive and, in some instances, survive.
- ✓ Households who need daily access to water (basically everyone).

For all of these households, daily living is difficult to manage under the best of circumstances. Most navigate their challenges most of the time. For too many, however, their economic situations mean that their energy burden is too great for some of the time. HB 664 seeks to give these individuals some level of certainty as to their options during times when they simply cannot afford to cover all their bills, including for utilities.

In essence, HB 664 updates current protections by extending the existing delay from disconnection for customers with serious medical conditions so that it applies to (a) all regulated electric, gas and water utilities, and (b) allows households including infants (12 months and under) to delay disconnection by 60 days following the notice of service termination for non-payment. The bill also increases the right of a customer to seek delays based on these medical and socially vulnerable exemptions from 2 to 3 times in a 12-month period, and requires utilities to report on the number of delays granted.

In summary, Delegate Kory's HB 664 ...

1. Updates the existing utility disconnection policy for medically vulnerable customers of all regulated electric, gas and water utilities.
2. Updates eligibility requirements and allows nurse practitioners to certify that a customer qualifies for a disconnection delay due to a medical vulnerability.
3. Lengthens the duration of the delay.

I call upon committee members to approve HB 664, not for my family members, but for those who do not enjoy the level of support that my loved ones do. Let's "stop eating our seed corn." Thank you for your consideration.

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