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To Whom It May Concern:

As the Chair of the Montgomery County Board of Commissioners, I am writing this letter to strongly recommend that the Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission extend the existing moratorium which has been protecting those unable to pay for utilities from losing those services and putting them in health and life threatening circumstances.

I recognize that the extension that was put in place in March of 2020 was intended to be an emergency stopgap measure; at that time, there was great uncertainty as to how long this crisis would last or what the full implications of it would be. The moratorium is of critical benefit to our residents and we appreciate the swift actions taken by the PUC. I also recognize that it was not intended to be a sustainable response, and now that we understand that economic recovery will likely take a long term effort, a commensurate response strategy is required.

I am recommending the following:

1. That the moratorium be extended at this time. There are a number of factors in this recommendation. We know that a significant portion of Montgomery County residents meet the threshold for utility insecurity, without the additional burden that the pandemic has put on them. Prior to COVID-19, according to research conducted by the United Way of Pennsylvania, 23% of Montgomery County households fell within the “ALICE” definition, which stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, and Employed. As a result of COVID-related job loss and health issues, that percentage has likely increased dramatically. Additionally, the unemployment rate in Montgomery County increased exponentially during the spring of 2020, and remains significantly elevated at 11.8%, or approximately 51,000 individuals.

Additionally, we know that residential usage of utilities has increased significantly due to work and school at home requirements. This has been further impacted by the record setting heat this summer; air conditioning costs make up a significant amount of residential utility costs, and is life and health saving.

Finally, while we know that this will be a long term issue, there remain some immediate uncertainties that will have a large impact on the ability to pay for utilities. It is unclear what will

happen as schools are beginning to open, and to whether people will return to distance schooling from home. The same remains true for work from home requirements. The economic implications of these issues have a direct bearing on the capacity to pay for utilities over the next few months. Montgomery County does not have alternative mechanisms currently to provide relief to the additional needs that would occur if the moratorium were lifted in the immediate future.

We believe that keeping the moratorium in place while designing a long term, sustainable strategy is the only way to protect an increasing pool of vulnerable people.

2. That the easing of the moratorium be done in a phased way, and that the criteria for phasing be attached to benchmarks, like unemployment rates, and factors related to economic improvement.
3. That the endpoint of sustainable strategy be a revised set of criteria and protocols for seeking relief when people are unable to pay their bills, and that those criteria be established in light of the reality that many individual households are going to continue to experience significant economic hardship for an indefinite period of time.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Val Arkoosh', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Valerie A. Arkoosh, MD, MPH
Chair, Montgomery County Board of Commissioners