

AUC Winter Utilities Reconnection Program  
**Meeting Summary**

**Meeting date** September 20, 2021 **Time** 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

**Location** MS Teams **Facilitator** AUC Staff

Teleconference  
Phone: 1-866-792-1318  
Conference code: 8665992

**1 Feedback from group about the last winter moratorium cycle**

Alberta Utilities Commission staff reminded stakeholders that the intention of the Winter Utilities Reconnection Program (WURP) is to prevent vulnerable customers from freezing in the winter because their utilities were disconnected.

**2 Referral process – social service agencies to provide updated contact and process information.**

- Staff from Alberta Works clarified that its mandate includes reaching out to vulnerable customers, and helping to connect them with the resources they require, where possible. This service is not limited to customers that have paid all or most of their bills.
- Alberta Works staff provided an overview of the strict criteria that must be met to receive financial assistance, including looking at client bank statements and lifestyle choices. All three conditions must be present to be eligible:
  - Beyond the control of client
  - Presents a health and wellness concern
  - No other resources available that could help the client, or client cannot wait for a payment from other resources.
- A retailer asked if the criteria and process is similar to prior years.
- Alberta Works staff replied that it is the same criteria, however, the intake process is slightly different when these calls all go through the contact center.
- A representative from the Utilities Consumer Advocate (UCA) asked how long the process takes. Alberta Works staff replied that it depends if the situation is marked as urgent. Each individual situation is discussed and assessed with an emergency coordinator. If it is determined that the situation is an emergency then

the call would be returned the next day, otherwise calls would be returned within five days.

- The UCA staff added that if a customer claims that they've been denied by Alberta Works, they can be referred to the UCA for assistance.
- A retailer inquired about the success rate of clients that receive support, and whether the statistics have changed since the pandemic.
- Alberta Works staff replied that no comprehensive data has been gathered for requests received and met pre pandemic or post pandemic. That being said, essentially approval rates have stayed relatively static with no significant spike or decrease across the board since March 2020.

### **3 What effect the ongoing pandemic will have on disconnections/reconnections this fall?**

- In advance of the meeting, AUC staff posed the following questions in an effort to better understand what effect the ongoing pandemic will have on reconnections this fall.

*(a) Since the onset of disconnection season in the spring, what has been your reconnection rate for customers who have been disconnected for non-payment? Is this rate different this year than in pre-COVID years?*

- APEX Utilities inc. staff replied that the disconnection rate is lower than previous years as they completely paused credit collections activity on July 8, 2021 because of their new CIS launched.
- Direct Energy Regulated Services replied that there are 30 per cent less disconnections this year than in 2019. Reconnection rates this year are aligned with those of 2019.
- ENMAX Energy replied that the disconnection rate is similar to 2019 with the customer reconnection rate being the same rate as in the past.
- EPCOR Energy replied that their reconnection rate from April 2021 to August 2021 is 49 per cent.
- ATCO Electric Ltd. replied that their reconnection rate is 6 per cent higher than in 2019 and roughly 19 percent higher than in 2018. ATCO Electric further stated that they have received fewer repeat customers.
- ATCO Gas' reconnection rate is 77 percent with a 23 percent disconnection rate, roughly 3000 sites. In total approximately 15,000 sites have been deenergized while in previous years there were 23000 for the full year.

*(b) If you had to send the UCA a list of customers that have been disconnected for non-payment but have yet to be reconnected, as of today, what would those numbers look like? Are the numbers typical for this time of year?*

- Apex stated that 427 sites remain disconnected which is a bit higher than 2020.
- ENMAX Energy replied that they currently have 730 customers disconnected which is roughly 40 more than this same time in 2019. ENMAX further explained that they work with their customers through September prior to sending the list to the UCA.
- EPCOR Energy replied that they currently have roughly 2300 sites that remain disconnected for non-payment which is significantly higher than in 2019 and 2020 (in 2019 there were 1400 on the list to the UCA and in 2020 there were 600).
- ATCO Electric replied that they currently have approximately 700 accounts outstanding to disconnect including residential and farm customers.

*(c) There was a time in the last year where average residential customer arrears were higher than pre-COVID times. Are you still experiencing this?*

- ENMAX Energy replied that arrears have slightly improved through August and September.
- Direct Energy indicated that disconnected customers have outstanding balances that are 34 percent higher than in 2019.

*(d) Are your reconnection processes any different this year (e.g., are you doing anything different to assist customers with getting reconnected before the winter)?*

- Direct Energy stated that they have implemented flexible policies for customers that require assistance and are making attempts to pay their bills. EPCOR and AUI are similarly working with customers.
- ATCO Electric replied that going forward they plan to focus on reconnections in the order that they receive them. Nothing different has been introduced in terms of waiving fees.
- ENMAX Energy replied that no changes to processes have been implemented, however, going into 2022 they have proposed changes to their terms and conditions that would allow any retailer to request a financial de-energization rather than limiting the request to the RRO.
- FortisAlberta Ltd. replied that they started waiving their reconnection fees in July 2021 and that they will continue to waive these fees until the end of 2021. Fortis further stated that they have also provided a credit to those

customers who had been charged the priority reconnection fee between January 1, 2021 and July 2021.

- The regulated service providers who are offering flexible reconnection (asking for less arrears to be paid before reconnecting a customer) indicated that these customers who get reconnected before the winter moratorium could be carrying higher outstanding balances going forward.

#### **4 Utilities Consumer Advocate Process – group to discuss timelines and other changes to process for 2021-2022**

- The UCA received 1485 customer files in 2020 which is considerably lower than normal.<sup>1</sup>
- The UCA successfully connected with 400 customers and assisted 158 customers with reconnection.
- The UCA will send out the template during the week of September 27, 2021, of the fields they want to see completed on the list. The question that was added in 2020, for whether the customer is on the deferral program, has been removed. The UCA stressed the importance that the formatting not be altered, that it be filled out in its entirety (e.g., postal codes), that duplicates be removed, that no commercial accounts be included, that email addresses are provided when possible, and to only include accounts who have been disconnected for financial reasons (not seasonal vacancy).
- Lists for this year must be submitted to the UCA by October 27, 2021, by the end of the day, and also sent to distributors to facilitate site visits.
- A retailer asked whether customers should be directed to the UCA or to Alberta Works.
- UCA representatives replied that customers should be provided the phone numbers for both the UCA and Alberta Works. The UCA staff further stated that a listing of all financial aid options is provided on their website.
- The UCA has begun a scan of what additional funding may be available.
- AUC staff requested that retailers also send their lists to distributors if arrears are \$50 or less.
- The distributors all confirmed that no change to site visit process will be made for accounts facing arrears of \$50 or less.

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<sup>1</sup> As a group during the meeting we discussed that due to the UPDP program, which truncated the disconnection season in 2020, the overall number of disconnections were lower than in previous years.

- The UCA will send a list back to the retailers of customers who have told the UCA that they have moved so retailers can update their own records.

**ACTION:**

Retailers to provide the UCA (and distributors) with their finalized, scrubbed lists by 4:30 pm on October 27, 2021.

**5 Other issues and next steps**

- AUC staff requested that stakeholders email [regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca](mailto:regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca) if contacts have changed for individual WURP contacts at each utility.
- AUC staff thanked all parties for their participation and continued hard work on this initiative.