UTILITY WORKERS UNION OF AMERICA

JAMES SLEVIN
PRESIDENT

MICHAEL COLEMAN
SECRETARY-TREASURER

PATRICK M. DILLON
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

JOHN DUFFY
VICE PRESIDENT

Affiliated with A.F.L.-C.I.O.

1300 L STREET, N.W.
SUITE 1200
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005
202-899-2851
202-899-2852 FAX
www.uwua.net

May 7, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer, Leader McConnell, and Leader McCarthy:

As a labor union representing around 50,000 essential workers in the electric, gas, nuclear, steam, water and wastewater utility industries, the UWUA has been proud to watch our members rise to the challenges presented by the ongoing public health and economic crises precipitated by the COVID-19 virus. As essential workers operating and maintaining some of the most critical life-supporting infrastructure in society, our membership has gone above and beyond to keep the lights on, heating and cooking systems operating, and the water flowing. Without the hard work our members perform every day, the ability of other Americans to 'shelter in place' would be nearly impossible.

Power plants, gas and electrical grids, municipal services, and drinking and wastewater systems must continue to operate. The UWUA has fought for our members' ability to do so safely, knowing the risks of exposure many of these services must run just so that the rest of us can continue to enjoy life. Unfortunately, we have still recorded hundreds of cases of COVID-19 among our membership and, tragically, 13 of our members have died from the illness so far. We are proud, and humbled, to serve these heroes as they serve society.

In addition to the COVID-19 crisis itself, however, our members still must face the same everyday challenges with which all working families grapple, challenges growing greater every day as the economic pain of mass layoffs grows. With tens of millions of people out of work and facing the dilemma of housing costs, food, bills and the never-ending costs of life, ensuring access to the critical infrastructure needed for public health is a growing pandemic of its own.

Amid the debate over how best to ensure that so many people in crisis, whether due to illness, job loss, or both, retain access to vital utility services, the UWUA is speaking out in support of principles grounded in public health and safety, social justice, and long trusted systems to highlight how our critical industries can best serve society during this global emergency.

First, we have been proud to see that most utilities around the country are taking a high-road response to the current crisis by voluntarily suspending physical shutoffs of utility services. With unemployment nearing Great

Depression levels, few actions could do more to further harm people, and undermine public health and safety, than mass shutoffs of energy and water supplies. We support these voluntary actions by utilities.

Indeed, at this scale, such a phenomenon would be ripe to foment civil disorder. For these reasons, we stand by the decision many of our employers are making to take a proactive approach to securing their customers' basic dignity.

Second, in order to economically buoy up the millions of people currently navigating this crisis, we wholeheartedly support proposals to provide direct government support – whether federal or otherwise – to families struggling to keep up with some of the most basic costs of living, namely their utility bills. No one should be faced with a choice between paying a utility bill or buying groceries.

We urge a massive expansion of programs such as that embodied by the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Act (LIHEAP) or similar state and local programs aimed at ensuring basic services continue, despite economic challenges, as being critically important to preventing an even worse human catastrophe.

Third, precisely because utility systems cannot, under any circumstances, be allowed to falter or fail, using LIHEAP and similar programs as a means to secure utility revenue streams is vital to maintaining continuity of service. Further, the ability of utility providers to actively work with customers in financial crisis – and thereby help those customers avoid falling into irredeemable debt – is also necessary for service to continue and to assist people in emerging from this crisis as whole as can be managed.

Fourth, in all 50 state jurisdictions, utility commissions have already been reacting to the pandemic by working with their regulated providers on these very issues – continuity of service, shut-off policies, securing revenue streams, ensuring proper maintenance and, in short, carrying out the work that these commissions have done for decades.

We at the UWUA firmly believe in the ability of these highly specialized, technical regulators to do their job, and do it well. We see no reason at all for the federal government to substitute its authority or judgment for that of these state and local subject matter experts who are already working to manage the crisis. Any type of one-size-fits-all federal plan would disrupt the industry in ways that cannot be foreseen. Utilities, consumers and our members all need as much continuity as possible during this crisis. Disrupting the well-established state-based utility commission model will cause more harm than good for everyone involved.

Fifth, none of our members make us more proud than those who respond to infrastructure crisis just as police, fire and rescue crews, and medical professionals respond to personal crisis. No matter what else may be taking place, UWUA members roll out of their show-up yards every day in response to gas leaks, downed electrical equipment, and water main breaks.

These are life-threatening physical hazards, both to the public, and to the highly trained Utility Workers who respond to them. Indeed, every year some of our Union brothers and sisters lose their lives responding to these situations.

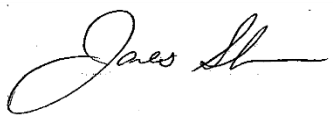
As these are the same crews who must also deal with more every day concerns such as turning utility service on and off, whether due to hazard or due to a customer's economic challenges, we oppose any federal action that would lead to these critically essential workers being laid off.

As our industries are already suffering massive revenue drop-offs due to the pandemic and the drops in customer usage that have resulted, we are in danger of losing the ability to respond in a timely fashion – or at all – if these essential workers are not kept in the workforce. Whether securing a gas leak, working with high-voltage electricity, or stopping the flooding from broken water infrastructure, these are all jobs that require high levels of skill, training and experience. If these workers are lost due to well-meaning, but ill-considered public

policy, the hazard to public health and safety can scarcely be overstated.

For all of these reasons and more, the UWUA stands behind our members, because our members stand behind all of us. Without them, modern society would not function and no response to the ongoing public health crisis would be possible. Based on our principles as Utility Workers, we are proud of the role our members play in society and call for public policy to ensure they are allowed to continue safely serving us all.

Sincerely,



James T. Slevin
National President
Utility Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO