

March 20, 2023

SB 278 - Utility Data Reporting for Community Assistance

Written-Only

Neutral

From:

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CleanAirNow Environmental Justice Organization

To:

Senate Utilities Committee

(Testimony follows)

Chairman Olson,

Members of the Committee,

CleanAirNow is a community-led environmental justice organization that creates systemic change in existing policies and practices to protect health and dismantle environmental racism that perpetuates the unequal distribution of environmental hazards in fenceline communities.

CleanAirNow is vastly experienced in energy equity and inequity, and has been working alongside the community to identify the energy inequities that affect disadvantaged and fenceline communities in our state.

From our research and by comparing states across the country, it is apparent that states that are leaders in addressing equity have worked to identify and prioritize equity as a goal, have properly defined the meaning of equity, have strived to cease inequitable practices and have attempted to establish protections to ensure these inequities are not perpetuated. In addition, it is important to proactively identify and engage community members who can drive equitable outcomes.

Senate Bill 278 is an important first step in holding public utilities accountable to the public they serve and increase the transparency of energy pricing and the bills that are burdening many households in the state of Kansas.

While there are many assistance programs available for low-income households to help in the payment of utility bills, and there are protection programs in place that can stop disconnections due to weather or medical problems, it has been our experience that many customers are not aware of or informed of these programs that may benefit them. It is always the burden of the customer to identify and pursue such options that are available to them in order to avoid unjust disconnections. The public utilities do not facilitate the access to this information and the default action is to cut off a customer rather than identifying the problem and trying to assist the customer in mitigating it.

While requiring the public utilities to report on all the data as defined by SB 278, the state legislature should also introduce further requirements as part of this bill, or a follow-up bill to codify the following:

1. Public utilities should work with local organizations, community members, and regulators to define the terms equity, overburdened customer, and environmental justice community, and map these definitions. By identifying the most disadvantaged communities and properly establishing these definitions, a public utility can identify its overburdened customers and work to better disseminate its assistance programs and services.
2. Implement an energy assistance program to provide better support to the broader group of overburdened customers and tie support to the ability to pay.
3. Codify the extreme weather protection program and the medical protection program into Kansas law, to ensure they are a requirement for all public utilities.
4. Establish a community-advisory board that can work with the Kansas Corporation Commission on implementing an equitable energy service for all Kansas customers, and especially those in overburdened communities.

CleanAirNow appreciates the intent of SB 278 as a data gathering initiative that can and will show the existing inequities among the residents of Kansas regarding access to and the affordability of their public utilities. We request that our above recommendations be considered by the committee in order to further expand the current bill and/or introduce further legislation that can address the points presented above.

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to comment.

Respectfully

Beto Lugo Martinez
CleanAirNow
Co-Executive Director

