



March 21, 2023

Opponent WRITTEN Testimony on SB 278

For the Senate Committee on Utilities

Laura Lutz, Sr Mgr, Government Affairs, Evergy

laura.lutz@evergy.com | 785.213.6511 | evergy.com

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the opportunity to comment on SB 278, which would require public utilities to report information regarding customer assistance programs, account delinquencies and disconnections. Evergy is always striving to keep prices affordable for our customers and dedicated to assisting those who are experiencing hardship or difficulty paying their bill. We direct thousands of customers a year to a multitude of bill payment assistance programs. In fact, last year alone, we linked customers to more than \$52 million in available utility payment assistance. In 2022, Evergy contributed \$2.2 million to agencies focused on emergency, energy burden and vulnerable communities.

Although a few of the data points suggested in SB 278 would likely be manageable, the scope of the majority of the requests and the frequency of the reporting leave questions as to how the data would ultimately be used. Evergy does not currently report by income level, census tract or zip code, and requiring that information on a monthly basis would precipitate substantial changes in data gathering and reporting. (We do not currently ask our customers for information about their income and would be hesitant to do so. We utilize a third party to collect and verify information for customers who participate in low-income eligible programs.) In addition, some of the reporting requirements in SB 278 are overly burdensome and duplicative of data already available elsewhere, such as the Low-income Energy Affordability Data (LEAD) Tool created by the U.S. Department of Energy.

That said, there are certain data requirements in the bill that Evergy acknowledges could be reasonable, useful and applicable, although perhaps on a less frequent basis than monthly. Some of that information could be provided in total, but not necessarily broken down to the level suggested in the bill. The following data points that Evergy could offer include:

- Number of customers receiving assistance from state programs such as LIEAP and Project Deserve.
- Number of customers that became eligible for disconnection and how many were completed.
- Annual description of available customer assistance programs, including terms of eligibility, the available budget for each program, any changes to the programs during the reporting year and any planned future changes to the programs.
- Annual reporting of the utility's benchmarks, goals or targets concerning customer assistance programs and the utility's performance relative to such metrics;

- Annual report of the methods and contents of communications to customers concerning available customer assistance programs, service disconnections, debt collection, customer rights and remedies, including medical protection programs, seasonal protection programs and extreme weather protection programs.

An area in which the bill’s proponents could partner with the utility industry for the benefit of consumers would be to advocate for extended LIEAP application windows in Kansas (currently ends March 31); help promote LIEAP enrollment events; and advocate for greater income guideline flexibility.

To conclude, although Evergy is opposed to SB 278 as written, we are open to working with the proponents to determine what portions of the legislation might be common ground from which to continue creating utility assistance programs that truly reach the most vulnerable and benefit the most customers.

The remainder of our written testimony provides information on the resources Evergy offers its customers who are struggling to pay their utility bills.

Reaching our most vulnerable customers:

Evergy’s mobile customer Outreach team participates in 150 Kansas resource events annually providing face-to-face payment assistance applications, information, and assistance to 14,000 Kansas customers.

Evergy Connect recently opened in Wichita, adjoining Wichita’s lowest income zip codes. Since its opening in November 2022, Connect in Wichita has had 2,500 customers through its doors. Customers receive individualized service for payment options and resources, energy savings information, program enrollment information and more. Additionally Connect hosts periodic resource events with other utilities, social service agencies and job training organizations.

Customer resources:

- Medical Extension for eligible customers experiencing a medical hardship - allows for a 21-day disconnect hold for each member of the household
- Social media livestreams and webinars to help customers know how to access Low-income Energy Assistance funds (“LIEAP”)
- Collaboration with individuals on specific and reasonable customer payment plans
- Options for Average Payment Plan (formerly budget billing), which establishes a monthly budget billing amount using the average of a customer’s last 12 bills. The average is adjusted each month to reflect actual usage.
- Direct customer emails, correspondence, text messaging and phone calls informing of payment options and links to applications.
- Education about The Kansas Homeowner Assistance Fund, which provides financial assistance for utility costs for homeowners financially impacted by the COVID pandemic
- Education about LIEAP, which provides a one-time per year payment to help with energy costs. Applications this year are open until March 31.
- Access to Project Deserve funds, which provides emergency assistance on energy costs to people with a severe disability, older adults (65 years+) and income-eligible households