Sponsored by:
Senator M. TERESA RUIZ
District 29 (Essex)

SYNOPSIS
Requires BPU to conduct study of effect of coronavirus 2019 pandemic on local and public utility service and to quarterly collect and publish certain local and public utility service and customer information.

CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT
As introduced.
S994 RUIZ

AN ACT concerning local and public utility service and customer information and supplementing Title 48 of the Revised Statutes.

BE IT ENACTED by the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey:

1. As used in P.L. , c. (C. ) (pending before the Legislature as this bill):

   “Board” means the Board of Public Utilities or any successor agency.

   “Coronavirus 2019” means the coronavirus disease 2019, as announced by the World Health Organization on February 11, 2020, and first identified in Wuhan, China.

   “Department” means the Department of Community Affairs.

   "Local utility" means any sewerage authority created pursuant to the "sewerage authorities law," P.L.1946, c.138 (C.40:14A-1 et seq.); any utilities authority created pursuant to the "municipal and county utilities authorities law," P.L.1957, c.183 (C.40:14B-1 et seq.); or any municipal, county, or regional utility, authority, commission, special district, or other local government entity, not regulated by the Board of Public Utilities, that provides electricity, gas, heat, power, sewer, or water service.

   “Personally identifiable information” means any information that is linked or reasonably linkable to an identified or identifiable customer.

   “Public utility” means a public utility, defined pursuant to R.S.48:2-13, providing electric, gas, sewer, or water service to customers.

2. a. The Board of Public Utilities, in consultation with the Department of Community Affairs, shall prepare and submit, within 30 days after the conclusion of a board proceeding concerning the response to the coronavirus 2019 pandemic, to the Governor and, pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1), to the Legislature, a written report which shall make findings and recommendations concerning the effect the coronavirus 2019 pandemic has had on local utility and public utility service to commercial and residential customers in this State. The data collected from the board’s proceeding concerning the response to the coronavirus 2019 pandemic shall be posted on the board’s Internet website and updated monthly until 180 days after the date of the termination of public health emergency and state of emergency declared on March 9, 2020 by the Governor, pursuant to Executive Order No. 103 and extended, where applicable, by subsequent executive orders. The data shall be formatted in a manner determined by the board and shall include, but not be limited to, the following information organized by month, utility
name, type of utility service provided, customer class, municipality, and zip code:
(1) the overall impact on local utility and public utility supply, demand, revenues, and expenses;
(2) the number of local utility and public utility customers, for each category of utility service and how those numbers compare to the previous year at the same time;
(3) the number of local utility and public utility service customer disconnection notices sent due to bill non-payment, service disconnections due to bill non-payment, service reconnections of customers disconnected for bill non-payment, average time between service disconnection due to non-payment and service reconnection, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;
(4) as applicable, the number of liens on real property placed, sold, or enforced due to non-payment, and how those numbers compare to the previous year at the same time;
(5) the number of customers in arrears by 30, 60, 90, 120, 150, and 180 days at the end of each month, the total dollar amount owed and average amount owed per customer in each of those categories, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;
(6) the number of customer accounts that became eligible for disconnection due to bill nonpayment but were not disconnected because of any legally mandated or voluntary suspension of disconnections due the coronavirus 2019 pandemic;
(7) the number of customers enrolled in deferred payment agreements at the end of each month, the total dollar amount of arrears and average amount of arrears per customer subject to those agreements, the average length of the repayment term under those agreements, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;
(8) the number of customers that entered into, successfully completed, or defaulted from a deferred payment agreement, the total dollar amount of arrears and average amount of arrears per customer subject to those agreements, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;
(9) available customer assistance programs, including terms of eligibility, available budget for each program, and any enhancements to the programs that are being made to address anticipated increased demand;
(10) the number of customers that applied for financial assistance under each applicable utility assistance program, and how that number cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compares to the previous year at the same time;
(11) the number of customers receiving assistance under each utility assistance program at the end of each month, and how that
number cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compares to the previous year at the same time;

(12) the number of customers charged late fees, penalties, and interest, the total dollar amount of late fees, penalties, and interest charged and average amount of late fees, penalties, and interest per customer subject to such charges, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;

(13) the average and median dollar amount billed to customer accounts and the average and median utility usage per customer account, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;

(14) the total dollar amounts billed to and collected from customer accounts how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time, except that such data need not be broken down by municipality and zip code within the service area of a utility;

(15) the methods and contents of general communications by local utilities and public utilities to customers concerning their rights and available assistance programs if customers are unable to pay their bills in full, excluding any customer-specific communications;

(16) the board’s assessment of whether existing customer assistance programs are presently, and in the future, sufficient to meet the financial needs of customers in arrears who are unable to pay those arrears in full, as well as the needs of customers who may be unable to pay future bills;

(17) a list of any planned local utility and public utility infrastructure projects that were scheduled to take place during or after the reporting period that were canceled or for which the actual or anticipated start date was delayed due to the financial or other impacts of the coronavirus 2019 pandemic;

(18) local utility and public utility revenue, including sales revenue and operating or net revenue information, and how those numbers compare to the previous year at the same time; and

(19) each local utility’s and public utility’s schedule of rates and charges. As used in this paragraph, "rates" mean the fixed component, if any, and the volumetric or other variable component, if any, of the cost of service that are applied to a category of customers and “charges” mean amounts that are billed to a customer under specific circumstances that are not included in the provider's base rate including, but not limited to, late fees, connection fees, impact fees for new development, deposits for opening new accounts, and any other fees, surcharges, or penalties.

b. A public utility shall, within 21 days of the effective date of P.L , c. (pending before the Legislature as this bill), and monthly thereafter until 180 days after the date of the termination of public health emergency and state of emergency declared on March
9, 2020 by the Governor, pursuant to Executive Order No. 103 and
extended, where applicable, by subsequent executive orders, file
with the board, in a form and manner determined by the board, the
information required pursuant to subsection a. of this section.

  c. A local utility shall, within 21 days of the effective date of
P.L. , c. (pending before the Legislature as this bill), and
monthly thereafter until 180 days after the date of the termination of
public health emergency and state of emergency declared on March
9, 2020 by the Governor, pursuant to Executive Order No. 103 and
extended, where applicable, by subsequent executive orders, file
with the Department of Community Affairs, in a form and manner
determined by the board, the information required pursuant to
subsection a. of this section. The department shall provide this
information to the board in a timely manner.

d. The board shall provide on its Internet website the data
required pursuant to subsection a. of this section, including in a
downloadable format the raw data from each update. The data
provided on the Internet website pursuant to P.L. , c. (C. )
(pending before the Legislature as this bill) shall not include
personally identifiable information of any customer.

3. a. Not more than 180 days after the date of the termination
of public health emergency and state of emergency declared on
March 9, 2020 by the Governor, pursuant to Executive Order No.
103 and extended, where applicable, by subsequent executive
orders, the board, in consultation with the department, shall collect
and compile in a report, on a quarterly basis, information
concerning local utility and public utility service and commercial
and residential customer information, which shall include, but not
be limited to the following, with all information organized by
month, utility name type of utility service provided, customer class,
municipality, and zip code:

  (1) local utility and public utility supply, demand, revenue, and
expense information;

  (2) the number of local utility and public utility customers, for
each category of utility service and how those numbers compare to
the previous year at the same time;

  (3) the number of local utility and public utility service
customer disconnection notices sent due to bill non-payment,
service disconnections due to bill non-payment, service
reconnections disconnected for bill non-payment, and how the
numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous
year at the same time;

  (4) as applicable, the number of liens on real property placed,
sold, or enforced due to non-payment, and how those numbers
compare to the previous year at the same time;

  (5) the number of customers in arrears by 30, 60, 90, 120, 150,
and 180 days at the end of each month, the total dollar amount owed
and average amount owed per customer in each of those categories, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;
(6) the number of customer accounts that became eligible for disconnection due to bill nonpayment but were not disconnected because of any legally mandated or voluntary suspension of disconnections due the coronavirus 2019 pandemic;
(7) the number of customers enrolled in deferred payment agreements at the end of each month, the total dollar amount of arrears and average amount of arrears per customer subject to those agreements, the average length of the repayment term under those agreements, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;
(8) the number of customers that entered into, successfully completed, or defaulted from a deferred payment agreement, the total dollar amount of arrears and average amount of arrears per customer subject to those agreements, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;
(9) available customer assistance programs, including terms of eligibility, available budget for each program, and any enhancements to the programs that are being made to address anticipated increased demand;
(10) the number of customers that applied for financial assistance under each applicable utility assistance program, and how that number cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compares to the previous year at the same time;
(11) the number of customers receiving assistance under each utility assistance program at the end of each month, and how that number cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compares to the previous year at the same time;
(12) the number of customers charged late fees, penalties, and interest, the total dollar amount of late fees, penalties, and interest charged and average amount of late fees, penalties, and interest per customer subject to such charges, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;
(13) the average and median dollar amount billed to customer accounts and the average and median utility usage per customer account, and how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time;
(14) the total dollar amounts billed to and collected from customer accounts how the numbers cited, pursuant to this paragraph, compare to the previous year at the same time, except that such data need not be broken down by municipality and zip code within the service area of a utility;
(15) the methods and contents of general communications by local utilities and public utilities to customers concerning their
rights and available assistance programs if customers are unable to pay their bills in full, excluding any customer-specific communications;

(16) the board’s assessment of whether existing customer assistance programs are presently, and in the future, sufficient to meet the financial needs of customers in arrears who are unable to pay those arrears in full, as well as the needs of customers who may be unable to pay future bills;

(17) a list of any planned local utility and public utility infrastructure projects that were scheduled to take place during or after the reporting period that were canceled or for which the actual or anticipated start date was delayed due to the financial or other impacts of the coronavirus 2019 pandemic;

(18) each local utility and public utility revenue, including sales revenue and operating or net revenue information, and how those numbers compare to the previous year at the same time; and

(19) each local utility’s and public utility’s schedule of rates and charges. As used in this paragraph, "rates" mean the fixed component, if any, and the volumetric or other variable component, if any, of the cost of service that are applied to a category of customers and “charges” mean amounts that are billed to a customer under specific circumstances that are not included in the provider’s base rate including, but not limited to, late fees, connection fees, impact fees for new development, deposits for opening new accounts, and any other fees, surcharges, or penalties.

b. A public utility shall file with the board, in a form and manner determined by the board, the information required pursuant to subsection a. of this section.

c. A local utility shall file with the Department of Community Affairs, in a form and manner determined by the board, the information required pursuant to subsection a. of this section. The department shall provide this information to the board in a timely manner.

d. The board shall provide on its Internet website the reports required pursuant to subsection a. of this section, including in a downloadable format the raw data from each report, simultaneously with the completion of each report. The information provided on the Internet website shall not include personally identifiable information of any customer.

4. The board, in consultation with the department, may adopt, pursuant to the "Administrative Procedure Act," P.L.1968, c.410 (C.52:14B-1 et seq.), rules and regulations necessary to effectuate the purposes of this act.

5. This act shall take effect immediately.
This bill requires the Board of Public Utilities (BPU), in consultation with the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), to prepare and submit, within 30 days of the effective date of the bill, to the Governor and to the Legislature, a written report which is to make findings and recommendations concerning the effects of the coronavirus 2019 pandemic on local utility and public utility service to commercial and residential customers in this State.

The data collected from the BPU’s proceeding concerning the response to the coronavirus 2019 pandemic is to be posted on the BPU’s Internet website and updated monthly until 180 days after the date of the termination of public health emergency and state of emergency declared on March 9, 2020 by the Governor, pursuant to Executive Order No. 103 and extended, where applicable, by subsequent executive orders. The data is to be formatted in a manner determined by the BPU and is to include certain information enumerated in the bill.

The bill requires a public utility, within 21 days of the effective date of the bill, to file with the BPU, in a form and manner determined by the BPU, the information required pursuant to the bill. A local utility is to, within 21 days of the effective date of the bill, file with the DCA, in a form and manner determined by the BPU, the information required pursuant to the bill. The DCA is to provide this information to the BPU in a timely manner.

The bill directs the BPU to provide on its Internet website the information required pursuant to the bill. The information provided on the Internet website is not to include personally identifiable information of any customer.

The bill provides that, not more than 180 days after the date of the termination of public health emergency and state of emergency declared on March 9, 2020 by the Governor, pursuant to Executive Order No. 103 and extended, where applicable, by subsequent executive orders, the BPU, in consultation with the DCA, is to continue to collect and compile, on a quarterly basis, information concerning local utility and public utility service and commercial and residential customer information, which is to include, but not be limited to, certain information enumerated in the bill. A public utility is to file with the BPU, in a form and manner determined by the BPU, the information required pursuant to the bill. A local utility is to file with the DCA, in a form and manner determined by the BPU, the information required pursuant to the bill. The DCA is to provide this information to the BPU in a timely manner.

The bill requires the BPU to provide on its Internet website the information required pursuant to the bill simultaneously with the completion of each report, which is to be updated on a quarterly basis. The information provided on the Internet website is not to include personally identifiable information of any customer.