

March 21st, 2023

SB 278 - Utility Data Reporting for Community Assistance

Oral Proponent

FROM: Zack Pistora, Kansas Sierra Club

Phone: 785-865-6503 / Email: zackpistora@gmail.com

TO: Senate Utilities Committee



Chairman Olson and Honorable Members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Kansas Chapter of Sierra Club, thank you for the opportunity to talk to SB 278, which would require public utilities to disclose account delinquencies and disconnections by zip code and census tract, among other information. By having regular reporting of geographic and specific, non-personally identifiable data, we think state and local governments, as well as nonprofit groups, can better focus assistance programs to complement public utility services and improve affordability for utility customers.

We know that tens of thousands of Kansans continually struggle to pay their monthly bills; unfortunately, inflation and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have only worsened financial stress. This financial stress can lead to even greater hardship, affecting the quality of life and opportunities of many Kansans. Access to services of public utilities is vital and necessary to modern life. Disconnections of essential utility services can jeopardize public health and safety, especially vulnerable households with seniors, persons with pre-existing medical conditions, or young children. Turning off power, heat, or water worsens the ability for people facing hardship to recover, work, provide home care, or repay the utility. Inevitably, when some customers cannot pay their bills, other ratepayers end up picking up the tab.

SB 278 enables better data-sharing to aid governments and charitable organizations in realizing which communities need assistance and how to make more effective use of resources. Transparent, regularly reported data—including but not limited to disconnection and reconnection rates, late fees, deferred payment arrangement information, and other credit and collections activity—is critical to both assessing the extent of hardship facing community residents in affording essential utility services and enabling more focused and timely assistance. Currently, publicly-available is quite limited both in quality and quantity. Some utilities disclose arrears and disconnections in reports to the Kansas Corporation Commission, while others do not. Current data being collected by utilities could be collected and reported to allow for more proactive or targeted engagement by state and local leaders.

SB 278 can also target energy efficiency and water conservation efforts to help utility customers of electric, heating fuels, and water improve their building efficiency, so those customers could save money on all bills going forward. Kansas is considered one of the worst states in terms of energy efficiency efforts; SB 278 could allow state and local governments to identify communities with residents faced with a high energy burden dedicate efficiency efforts in a more prescriptive way.

SB 278 needs to be fine-tuned, but its objectives and practical benefits merit your support.

Public utilities and other opponents of this bill are offering valuable input in helping bill proponents and policymakers understand what information is and is not currently being collected, what information is too burdensome or inappropriate for utilities to collect, which utility providers should be implicated by SB 278, and more. We welcome further input and will work in good-faith to accommodate concerns to improve this bill. Nevertheless, we do think we have a policy proposal that is quite positive – we hope the Legislature will understand that and help us pass this bill.

Thank you,

Zack Pistora | Legislative Director and State Lobbyist, Kansas Chapter of Sierra Club

The Sierra Club is the largest grassroots environmental organization dedicated to enjoying, exploring, and protecting our great outdoors. The Kansas Chapter represents our state's strongest grassroots voice on environmental matters for nearly fifty years.