

**Tuesday, July 7, 2020**

## **OEPA Prepping To Allow Water Disconnections To Resume**

**Public water systems will be cleared to resume disconnections for nonpayment by Friday, according to state officials.**

Environmental Protection Agency Director Laurie Stevenson on Friday will sign an order rescinding her prior order blocking those disconnections during the coronavirus pandemic, said agency spokeswoman Heidi Griesmer.

The initial order was issued March 31 and announced during one of Gov. Mike DeWine's near-daily televised coronavirus press briefings.

It stipulated that no public water system customers could be disconnected for non-payment, that anyone disconnected as of Jan. 1 be reconnected, and that any reconnection occur at no charge. (See Gongwer Ohio Report, March 31, 2020)

Director Stevenson first signaled the upcoming policy change in a missive to mayors, writing: "Now as the state has lifted the stay-at-home order and has re-opened businesses, restaurants, retail stores and other establishments, Ohio EPA will begin the process of revoking/terminating the March 31 order."

She emphasized the need to maintain communication with communities and the agency hosted a virtual roundtable with mayors late last month to discuss the issue.

"Even well before COVID-19, there have been many areas in Ohio where people have struggled to get access to water or who live with poor water quality and quantity on private well systems," the director said.

She added the agency will continue to prioritize drinking water and wastewater infrastructure through H2Ohio and that the agency stands "ready to assist you in any way that we can to help ensure the continued delivery of safe, clean drinking water to Ohioans."

The suspension of disconnection had won plaudits from consumer advocates.

Ohio Consumers' Counsel Bruce Weston said in a statement the policy should continue, adding: "Ohio should lead with its heart and keep Ohioans connected to utility services for the time being."

"The state's suspension of utility disconnections during the pandemic has helped many Ohioans, and we fear it's too soon to resume disconnections for families already hurting from the health and financial crisis," Mr. Weston said. "In Ohio, food-insecurity has nearly doubled, June rent went unpaid by half a million people, poverty levels are already high in places – with minorities disproportionately represented in poverty, many people have lost jobs, coronavirus cases are again on the rise, and now loss of essential utility service could make people's plight more desperate."

**Mr. Weston encouraged consumers who are behind on their bills to not delay in contacting their utility companies to review their options once the state's moratorium ends.**