

Legislation Text

File #: 200263, **Version:** 0

Calling on the Philadelphia Sheriff's Office, the First Judicial District of Pennsylvania, and area utility companies to explore temporary moratoriums on evictions, residential foreclosures, tax liens on residential properties, and utility shut-offs in response to the COVID-19 health emergency.

WHEREAS, We as local leaders recognize that economic security is fundamental to public health, and that we are only as healthy as those most vulnerable, least economically secure, and least covered by our social services. Thus we must do all we can to keep people secure enough to take care of themselves and endure a quarantine or treatment if required; and

WHEREAS, The World Health Organization ("WHO") has declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic, defined as the worldwide spread of a new virus for which most people do not have immunity; and

WHEREAS, More than 1,000 Americans have confirmed cases of COVID-19. Significant delays in testing have placed national testing rates far behind other countries, suggesting that many potential cases have gone untested and, thus potentially uncontained; and

WHEREAS, On March 6, 2020, Governor Wolf issued an emergency disaster declaration specifically noting a "threat of imminent disaster and emergency" with the potential to "cause significant adverse impacts" throughout the Commonwealth. There have been fifteen reported cases of COVID-19 in Pennsylvania to date; and

WHEREAS, In preparation for a likely health emergency, the City of Philadelphia began implementing precautionary measures, such as issuing citywide health guidelines and canceling large-scale public gatherings; and

WHEREAS, COVID-19 presents severe challenges for the public health and economic well-being of communities. According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, over 112,000 Philadelphia residents do not have health insurance. Health experts fear COVID-19 could be dire for vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, individuals with chronic conditions, and low-income populations who lack access to proper resources and care; and

WHEREAS, A global pandemic presents not only a public health crisis, but also an economic one. While some workers are afforded the option of working from home and can continue to both care for themselves and participate in the workforce, many others-including workers in the gig economy, hourly and part-time employees, and service sector workers-may not have this privilege. In the event of illness, or even possible quarantine, they are especially susceptible to further economic instability; and

WHEREAS, Housing stability is crucial in a public health emergency in which containment and treatment rely on individuals staying indoors and not being forced to seek shelter or experience homelessness; and

WHEREAS, Significant reductions in working hours, wages, or travel restrictions pose a hardship to

Philadelphians who already struggle to make rent or mortgage payments; and

WHEREAS, In 2018, Philadelphia ranked fourth in the nation among big cities in terms of court-filed evictions and continues to see hundreds of mortgage foreclosures every month. These evictions and foreclosures disproportionately impact African American neighborhoods and middle neighborhoods that have yet to recover from the Great Recession; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphia has prioritized housing security, including city rent subsidies and the First Judicial District's Mortgage Foreclosure Diversion Program. Additionally, City Council legislation established an affordable monthly payment program, the Owner Occupied Payment Agreements ("OOPA"), and Right to Counsel in landlord-tenant court among other protections; and

WHEREAS, Utility shut-offs also pose a significant risk to the health and safety of Philadelphia families, leading to housing instability and even the potential intervention of child protective services. Even more, in the event of quarantine, residents must be guaranteed access to utilities that make their homes habitable, including access to heat, light and water as well as telephone and internet services that provide essential connectivity; and

WHEREAS, A moratorium on utility shut-offs has precedent. In Pennsylvania, it is illegal for utility companies regulated by the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission-including Philadelphia Gas Works ("PGW") and PECO Energy Company- to sever services for low-income individuals between December 1 and March 31. Similarly, the Philadelphia Water Department ("PWD") has also instituted a winter moratorium on water shutoffs. Nevertheless, it is essential that utility companies extend such practices in the event of public health crises that similarly put families at risk, regardless of their income; and

WHEREAS, As strong partners in growing Philadelphia's local economy, telephone and internet providers similarly have the responsibility to provide for connectivity to access key public health information in the midst of a global health pandemic; and

WHEREAS, As communities deal with the spread of COVID-19, it is incumbent for local governments to lead an efficient and bold response that protects the safety of all residents as well as the public health; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, Calls on the Philadelphia Sheriff's Office, the First Judicial District of Pennsylvania, and area utility companies to explore temporary moratoriums on evictions, residential foreclosures, tax liens on residential properties, and utility shut-offs in response to the COVID-19 health emergency.