



BCAP NewsClips

July 21, 2020

WITF-FM, Harrisburg
“Smart Talk”
podcast on
Pennsylvania
broadband
expansion featuring
Sen. Kristin Phillips-
Hill (R-York) and
Rep. Pam Snyder (D-
Greene)

LightReading
Comcast’s AI action
extends to the
network core

Philadelphia Inquirer
‘No end in sight’ to
coronavirus, Fauci
tells cancer doctors
at Philly-run
conference

Politico
Corporate giants
shut down Trump
texting program

New York Times
Google Promises
Privacy With Virus
App but Can Still
Collect Location
Data

Reuters
Nokia rolls out 5G
networks for
industrial clients

As regulators struggle to decide when to end Pennsylvania’s moratorium on utility shutoffs, a Republican lawmaker is seeking support to offer financial assistance to households and small businesses behind on their bills because of the coronavirus pandemic.

In March, the Public Utility Commission directed all companies under its purview to halt electric, water, gas, and other utility shutoffs, and to reconnect service to any terminated customers. The moratorium was set to last until the end of Gov. Tom Wolf’s disaster declaration, which he extended for 90 more days in June. But with all 67 counties now in the least-restrictive reopening phase, PUC Chair Gladys Brown Dutrieuille said last week that Pennsylvania “finds itself in a different place” than in the spring. An endless moratorium could place some customers “at increased risk of default and termination in the future, when large bills inevitably become due,” she said.

Dutrieuille proposed the creation of a stakeholder task force to debate how and when to end the moratorium, an idea the commission rejected last week, opting to put the issue on hold yet again. The commissioners, however, are unanimous in their backing of a proposal from Sen. Tom Killion (R., Delaware) that would provide additional financial assistance to individuals and small businesses. Just how big the relief package will be has yet to be determined.

PennPIRG, a nonpartisan group that advocates for consumers, said nearly 800,000 households and 55,000 businesses in Pennsylvania are at risk of a shutoff. Those estimates are based on recent data that major and smaller utility companies submitted to the PUC showing how many accounts would be subject to termination. The group is calling on lawmakers to appropriate at least \$150 million in aid. In an email, Killion said his staff is “reviewing the recent filings of utilities with the PUC and working to determine the number of affected customers and the size of the needed assistance package.”

Pennsylvania still has \$1.3 billion in flexible federal stimulus dollars it can spend on assistance programs like Killion’s. In May, Wolf and lawmakers agreed on a \$2.6 billion package that sent millions to struggling nursing homes, created a grant program for small businesses, and provided rental assistance to households at risk of eviction.

While some in Harrisburg are waiting to see if Congress will allow states to use any remaining funds to make up for lost revenue — which could total \$5 billion in Pennsylvania — lawmakers can’t sit on these dollars forever. The money

Harrisburg Patriot-News

[Bill requiring government transparency during emergencies awaits action by governor](#)

Altoona Mirror

[GOP mounts effort to curb Wolf](#)

Harrisburg Patriot-News

[Pa. lawmaker plans to introduce bill to protect state's monuments](#)

West Chester Daily Local News

[As he prepares to retire, Sen. Andy Dinniman \(D-Chester\) calls for 'transformative change'](#)

must be spent by Dec. 30. Seniors, families with children, and those who have been recently laid off because of the pandemic are vulnerable to utility shutoffs, especially as more people stay home in the summer to escape the heat, said Elizabeth Marx, an attorney with the Pennsylvania Utility Law Project. "Sheltering in place has raised utility costs for a lot of households," Marx said. "When you're home all day long, you use a lot more water. Your kids don't go to school, so you use a lot more electricity. All of those things are causing costs to go up on residential consumers."

Pennsylvania has already offered some financial assistance to these households. With \$34.9 million from the federal CARES Act, the state Department of Human Services in May began offering crisis payments of up to \$800 through an existing program that provides funds to low-income households that need help paying energy bills. The state had approved more than 36,000 applications as of Thursday, a department spokesperson said. The program will end on Aug. 31 or earlier if the funds run out.

But existing programs have clear income requirements, meaning families that have not struggled financially before may have little recourse other than negotiating a payment plan or hoping a utility company expands its hardship program. In a June 30 letter to lawmakers, the PUC's four commissioners cited those restrictions as an obstacle in need of a fix. "While many utility customers have been able to keep up with their bills during the moratorium, many others have not, some for the first time," the commissioners wrote. "We understand that the crisis has affected not only low-income customers, but also customers with incomes higher than the federal poverty guidelines."

In a memo seeking support from his colleagues, Killion said his plan would provide additional funding to existing programs for low-income customers and expand eligibility to people who have lost income due to the pandemic. John Kelemen, a spokesperson for Killion, said the senator expects to introduce the bill "in the very near future." "Leadership knows it is a top priority for Sen. Killion," Kelemen said.

Dutrieuille, chair of the PUC, recommended last week that utility companies adopt other protections including waiving late fees and establishing flexible payment plans for all customers. Some utilities have similar plans in place. In May, PPL Electric Utilities, which serves 1.4 million households in Pennsylvania, told the PUC it would increase the number of times it attempts to reach a customer before terminating service and offer for large balances monthly payment plans that are not solely based on income.

Still, Emma Horst-Martz, a campaign associate for PennPIRG, said there are fears those programs won't be enough to keep the lights on for many Pennsylvania households. "All of these utility conversations sound really nitty-gritty, like it's meant for policy wonks," Horst-Martz said. "But when you break it down, the reality [is] that not being able to pay a \$60 utility bill for one month could land you in a spot where you lose electricity that keeps your fridge running, keeps your food cold, you can't have a fan or air-conditioning during the hot summer months, you don't have internet to find a new job. This will have serious impacts on everyday people." – **Spotlight PA**

Here's what "[Pennsylvania Breaking News](#)" tells visitors to its Facebook Page about itself: "No buttery PC garbage here! Raw conservative news. No mainstream filters! Unapologetic patriotism!" That's a legitimate exercise of free speech, to be sure. But the news feed that re-launched on Sunday surged into Pennsylvania's public consciousness by Monday morning. The site gained attention and criticism stemming from a Sunday post with a headline that said Gov. Tom Wolf was preparing to send some Pennsylvania counties back into the "red phase," the most restrictive of his coronavirus pandemic reopening plan.

“BREAKING: Governor Wolf Lists Counties Likely Returning to Red Phase,” the website’s headline blared. “Amidst Wolf’s Latest Articles of Impeachment, He Says These Counties Are Going Back to Red.”

The Wolf Administration through a spokesman denied the governor was moving any counties to the red phase and the headline was ultimately revised. Still, the original post had earned more than 300,000 views by 1 p.m. Monday, according to the site. In fact, the Wolf Administration had highlighted several counties Friday that it said it was paying close attention to because positive rates on coronavirus tests had risen above 5 percent. But the governor’s office never said or implied that it had made a decision about rolling back the re-openings in those places.

The Wolf Administration’s business and other restrictions aimed at stopping the spread of coronavirus - and the emergency declaration under which they have been ordered - have become a major point of contention between the Democratic governor and the state’s Republican-controlled legislature, as well as county commissioners in various counties. It’s all the more sensitive given the recent uptick in positive tests statewide. In an interview Monday afternoon, one of Pennsylvania Breaking News’s owners Wyatt Uhl conceded that the original headline on the coronavirus cases led readers to a conclusion that hadn’t happened yet.

In the course of that interview, Uhl said the original post published without a proofread and he made a revision to the headline during the call, which now suggests the counties “might be going back to red.” “I do see how a lot of people got confused,” Uhl said. He stopped short of an apology. Uhl, who is 24, also tried to explain that, the flashy name notwithstanding, he and his partners sees themselves more as commentators with a point of view than classic reporters. “I don’t think we are a news outlet,” Uhl said, noting that he worked as a construction site flagman until recently and still repairs cars on the side. “Basically the whole page concept is to appeal to the Pennsylvania conservative people. At this point it’s kind of like a blog, if you will.” “We’re not really out there to be like: ‘Hey, we’re big in the press. We’re hotshots.’ No, I mean, we’re just a bunch of country bumpkins out there that feel like: ‘Hey, we have a server. Let’s use it’... We’re kind of dissatisfied with how the mainstream’s running it.”

But the site’s roller-coaster debut shed a light on the concerns many have over the redefinition of “the news” as more people get their information from full-blown partisan Web sites. In some ways, Russ Eshleman, head of Penn State’s journalism department, said it’s an approach as old as the public relations business itself. Twenty years ago, Eshleman noted, Democratic and Republican Party caucuses did their own television newscasts aired on the Pennsylvania Cable Network. “It looked like a real newscast, but it was P.R.,” Eshleman said. “There’s not a whole lot of difference to me between that and this. It’s purporting to give news, when you’re actually giving a point of view. “I just hope readers know better.”

Eshleman offered this checklist for people who are actively seeking the facts to keep in mind as this partisan-charged election year progresses:

- Look for news sources that provide a diversity of voices. In other words, if one party is criticized in the story, has the reporter given the subject of that criticism a chance to respond or explain their position.
- Are the sources of the information clearly identified? That is a mainstay of traditional news reporting.
- Are the reporters who produced the content named? All traditional news outlets do.
- Look for fair, objective language that is not clearly reaching to provoke a reaction.

“Pennsylvania Breaking News” probably violated that last point with a separate post Sunday. In a post, the site identified state Health Secretary Dr. Rachel Levine as Richard Levine, Levine’s given name before she changed genders. The name has been a rallying point for some social conservatives,

and has prompted [fierce pushback from Levine and advocates for the expansion of anti-discrimination laws](#) in Pennsylvania to include sexual orientation and gender identity.

Uhl was making no revisions to that post Monday, standing on this statement that he and his colleagues had issued to a group called Pennsylvania Equality Project earlier in the day: "In our story about doctor Levine, there is no intention of malice, we are simply calling him by his paternal name according to his appropriate biological gender. Calling somebody by a known alias, former name or birth name is not a crime, and is definitely not slander. "Was it proper to call Dr. Levine Richard? Probably not. But we're setting ourselves on a path to break away from the norms set by journalists in this day and age to be blunt and get down to the bottom of things as they are. Facts do not yield for feelings. News is a representation of fact, and we're putting out the facts that nobody else wants to cover."

Equality Project Vice President Matt Haslam said the group will formally report Pennsylvania Breaking News to Facebook "for being slanderous and for using hate speech." Uhl told PennLive Monday that he and his colleagues acquired the Facebook page in February from WPMG, which is described as [a digital television station based in Kittanning, Pa.](#), and originally registered the Internet domain name. They were attracted to the page because it had about 15,000 followers, allowing them to make revenue from targeted ads sold through Google AdSense. He would not disclose the purchase price and attempts to reach WPMG for this report were not successful.

So what about that name? Uhl said he and his partners have attempted to reach Facebook to change the name of their page, but the Internet giant has refused because the prior owner had already done that several times. PennLive's attempts to reach Facebook to corroborate Uhl's claims were not immediately successful. Uhl said he and his partners - including three writers and one graphic designer - decided to re-launch the page this weekend, in part because of [the ongoing controversy between the Wolf Administration and Lebanon County](#). In addition to their self-generated content, they will also link to some other news sources and give credit to their reporting. He said they may consider providing on-scene coverage of rallies and events, as various other partisan Facebook pages do, but "we currently don't have the resources to do that at this time." -- *Pennlive*

[Musikfest's 2020](#) virtual stage just got a bit more crowded. On Monday, a festival news release announced that guitar-maker C.F. Martin & Co. will bring a new component to [Musikfest](#) with Jam in Place — a concert showcase to be featured every night of the festival. According to the release, the virtual stage shows will kick off the Virtual Musikfest streams (at [musikfest.org](#) and [themorningcall.com/musikfest](#)) at 6 or 6:30 p.m. July 31-Aug. 9.

The Jam in Place stage will feature performances from Martin guitar artists Shawn Camp, a two-time Grammy-winning performer and songwriter; Lauren Mascitti, a former "American Idol" contestant; Bri Bagwell, a top Texas country artist; and Kendal Conrad, a familiar face at Musikfest. Musikfest 2020, presented by ArtsQuest, will take place July 31-Aug. 9. The festival will include nearly 40 concerts to be broadcast via [musikfest.org](#) as part of Virtual Musikfest. You can also watch those performances at [themorningcall.com/musikfest](#).

Performances will be aired live from Service Electric TV studios and then shared on the [musikfest.org](#) website. The festival will include [on-site food and beverages at SteelStacks](#) as well as 10 Musikfest favorite food vendors. Additional details on the festival, including possible in-person events and concerts at SteelStacks, will be announced this month. — *Allentown Morning Call*

Former Hazleton mayor and Congressman Lou Barletta, part of the Thunder and Lightning duo during Donald Trump's campaign four years ago, will lead Pennsylvania's delegation at the Republican convention that will nominate Trump next month. "I am honored to have been voted Chairman of the @PAGOP Delegates for the @GOPconvention. I can't wait to see everyone in Jacksonville and work together to re-elect @realDonaldTrump," Barletta tweeted on Saturday after being unanimously elected chair by party delegates during a videoconference.

The Republican National Convention is scheduled for Aug. 24-27 at indoor and outdoor sites in Jacksonville, Florida. Because of COVID-19, details have been in flux for the convention, originally planned for Charlotte, North Carolina. Six delegates from each state still plan to meet for opening motions Aug. 24 in Charlotte. Barletta said he will be part of Pennsylvania's group in Charlotte before going to Jacksonville.

In Jacksonville, the party restricted attendance to the 2,500 regular delegates until the final day, when Trump will arrive. Then delegates can bring a guest, and alternate delegates may attend, which might enlarge attendance to 7,000. "Pennsylvania put Donald Trump in the White House as the 45th president," Barletta said, "and it looks like it may come to Pennsylvania again."

Polls last week showed Trump trailed Democrat Joe Biden by 13% in Pennsylvania, but Barletta said Trump overcame a similar deficit in the state in 2016. "Four years ago, all of the experts said Donald Trump had no chance to win the presidency, and he was behind by double digits, just as the polls are showing now," Barletta said. "All the same pollsters who predicted he was going to lose are doing it again ... I think the exact same thing is happening once again. The experts are going to be shocked."

This year, Barletta said he has been speaking to labor groups and other organizations to build support for Trump. Four years ago, Barletta became one of the first members of Congress to support Trump and attended rallies where Trump called him and then-Congressman Tom Marino "Thunder and Lightning." Barletta also was part of Trump's transition team in 2016 and left Congress after losing a Senate race to Bob Casey in 2018. – **Hazleton Standard-Speaker**

