Discussion on City's current utility disconnection policy

4/27/2022

Brief overview of utility advocacy work

March 25, 2020 -- Tallahassee Utilities enacted a utility moratorium

City Offers Financial Relief to Utility Customers Amid COVID-19

Program Provides Immediate Relief with Deferment Option

March 26, 2020

One day after City Commissioners participated in an intergovernmental agency board decision approving a $1 million emergency disaster relief package for local businesses, the City of Tallahassee is launching a program to help further ease the financial burden that businesses and individuals may be experiencing as a result of COVID-19.

The Utility Relief Program provides City customers facing financial hardships with an option to defer payment of current monthly bill for water, sewer, electric and natural gas and other utility charges until this fall.

“This alternative payment program is essentially a 6-month, interest-free loan to help those in our community struggling financially during these uncertain times. Through this City program, residential, commercial and not-for-profit utility customers will have time to recover from any financial impacts they are experiencing because of this COVID-19 crisis,” James Barnes, the City’s Chief Customer Officer, said.

The program applies to a City Utility bill issued after March 12, 2020, the same day the City announced that no one would be disconnected for non-payment, thus ensuring the community continued to receive essential utility services during this global health pandemic. The program will run through May 12, 2020.

Participants in the Utility Relief Program can expect the carryover to be billed in installments and clearly identified as a separate line item on their future bills beginning in September. Participating customers will also receive a reminder notice approximately two weeks prior to receiving their statement. The City will work with customers who participate on an individual basis.

Additional resources for Tallahassee businesses and their employees who are experiencing hardships during this crisis can be found online at oevforbusiness.org. Information includes the COVID-19 Emergency Disaster Relief (CEDR) Grant Program, which was developed locally to leverage and align with up to $800 million federal dollars to assist local small businesses.

The City continues to encourage utility customers to use energy wisely. To help, the City offers a wide range of energy efficiency programs, including free energy audits, energy retrofit grants, natural gas and Energy Star appliance rebates and ceiling insulation grants.

For more information, contact the City of Tallahassee at 850-891-4968 or visit ***Talgov.com/UtilityRelief***.

Contact Information

Alison Faris, Communications Department, 850-891-8533

City Press Release

1. $1M emergency relief package for businesses
2. Utility Relief Program for customers to defer payment of utility bill until the fall
3. Utility moratorium -- “no one [will] be disconnected for non-payment”
4. Customers will receive an advance, two-week notice before moratorium ends and repayment begins

March 25, 2020 -- Tallahassee Utilities enacted a utility moratorium

NEWS

Blueprint OKs $1M for Tallahassee businesses hit by coronavirus; some commissioners wanted more

Karl Etters Tallahassee Democrat

Published 8:55 a.m. ET Mar. 25, 2020 | **Updated 10:18 a.m. ET Mar. 26, 2020**

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Mayor John Dailey on tapping into Blueprint money for local economic stimulus

Tallahassee Democrat

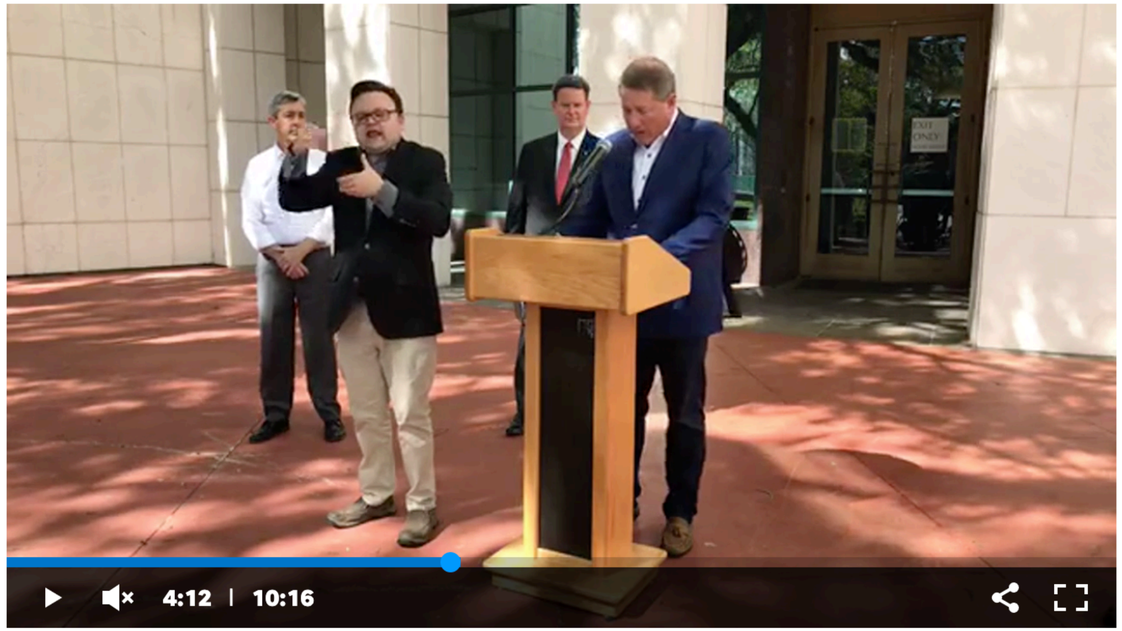
NEWS

City of Tallahassee offering utility payment relief amid coronavirus pandemic

Karl Etters Tallahassee Democrat

Published 2:53 p.m. ET Mar. 26, 2020 | **Updated 3:03 p.m. ET Mar. 26, 2020**

View Comments



February 24, 2021 -- City Commission voted to end the utility moratorium

CITY OF TALLAHASSEE

Agenda Item Details

Meeting	Feb 24, 2021 - City Commission Meeting & Summary
Category	13. POLICY FORMATION AND DIRECTION
Subject	13.02 Availability of U.S. Treasury Utility Bill Assistance and Resumption of Utility Disconnections for Non-Payment – James Barnes, Customer Operations
Type	Action, Information
Fiscal Impact	Yes
Dollar Amount	9,400,000.00
Budgeted	No
Recommended Action	Option 1: Authorize staff to resume utility disconnects for non-payment, work with utility customers to apply for U.S. Treasury utility and rent assistance funds, and to establish payment agreements with utility customers on a case-by-case basis.

February 24, 2021 -- City Commission voted to end the utility moratorium

The Utility Moratorium ended on April 24, 2022, with the following requirements in place:

- Customers receive a 60-day advance notice
- City Utility would work with customers to apply for U.S. Treasury utility and rent assistance funds
- City Utility would establish payment agreements with customers on a case-by-case basis

March 23, 2021 -- Communication from City Utilities

YourOwnUtilities <YourOwnUtilities@talgov.com> Tue, Mar 23, 2021 at 12:32 PM
To: "greenshelby@gmail.com" <greenshelby@gmail.com>
Cc: YourOwnUtilities <YourOwnUtilities@talgov.com>

Dear Shelby,

Thank you for your inquiry. At this time, no announcements have been made regarding disconnections due to overdue balances. When the announcement is made and the process begins, we will be providing the necessary information through every available avenue, including mail, text, automated phone calls, email, physical notices (door hangers left by CoT technicians) and social media outlets. No contact attempts have been made at this time.

In regards to the assistance we intend to render, payment arrangements will be offered for a period of up to 6 months, provided the customer in question first makes a payment for a minimum of 1/3rd of the outstanding balance.

When we provide the notices to customers, we will include the following information:

- Total outstanding balance
- Payment arrangement options
- Options for submitting payment
- Social Service Agency and LERAP (Leon Emergency Relief Assistance Program) contact and application information

March 23, 2021 -- Communication from City Utilities

Shelby Green <greenshelby@gmail.com>
to YourOwnUtilities

Mar 23, 2021, 1:05 PM

Rhett,

Thank you for the information! I'm a little bit confused by your statement: "at this time, no announcements have been made regarding disconnections due to overdue balances."

At the 2/24 Commission meeting, Commissioner Porter inquired about the CoT Utilities' capacity to communicate the utility disconnects to residents. In response, Mr. Barnes, the CoT's Chief Customer Officer, said: "Yes, Commissioner, we will work with our Communication Department, **as we already have been**, to ensure that every customer has full access and knowledge of all of the various support areas that they can get assistance with." Also in that meeting, Mr. Reese Goad, the CoT's City Manager, added: "with the direction that the Commission is headed, **we would immediately begin communicating**. I think that's important and it would be a call to action. Later in the meeting, Mr. Barnes also said that direct communication has been made with residents who have delinquent accounts.

Utility disconnects are set to resume in about 30 days. The Board has requested a proactive communications strategy. If communications have not been made, when will they begin?

Thanks,
Shelby

March 23, 2021 -- Communication from City Utilities

YourOwnUtilities <YourOwnUtilities@talgov.com> Mar 23, 2021, 3:56 PM

to YourOwnUtilities, me

Dear Shelby,

My apologies, my information was outdated. Communications regarding the resumption of standard operating procedures began being sent out Monday, 3/8/21, and will continue until all affected customers have been notified via every possible avenue.

CITY OF TALLAHASSEE

Thank you,
Rhett H.
Customer Account Specialist II
Customer Solutions and
E-Commerce Team
850-891-2060 (o)|
408 N. Adams St., Tallahassee, FL
32301

It is the responsibility of the customer and property owner to ensure the premise has been inspected and is ready for utility services to be activated. The City of Tallahassee will not be responsible for any damages to property caused by turning on requested services. To ensure safety we do not turn on natural gas service and provide the initial pilot lighting until a premise is occupied and a customer is present at the home.

March 23, 2021 -- Communication from City Utilities

City of Tallahassee
Your Own Utilities℠

Customer Operations | 408 N. Adams St. | Tallahassee | FL | 32301 | 850.891.4YOU (4968)

Dear City of Tallahassee Utility Customer,

According to our records, your City of Tallahassee utility account currently carries an outstanding balance, which now makes your account subject to disconnect. **To avoid disconnection of services, immediate action is required by you.**

- To make a utility payment, visit ***Talgov.com***. We offer a variety of ways for you to pay your utility bill online, by text or by phone.
- To work directly with our specially trained customer care representatives, call 850-891-4968. We are here to serve you from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., seven days a week. Our team can help connect you to available federal funds and local community resources, as well as help establish a payment agreement that works for you.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created immense challenges for many in the community. The City of Tallahassee is proud to have implemented a variety of initiatives during the past year to support utility customers who are facing financial challenges and is committed to helping customers connect with available federal and local resources for assistance.

The City of Tallahassee was one of the first utilities in the state to suspend utility disconnects for non-payment and, now roughly a year later, will be one of the last to resume standard operations. Our customer care team is ready to work one-on-one with you and is knowledgeable about a variety of federal and local assistance programs. **Call the City's customer care team today at 850-891-4968.** Again, we are here to serve you from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., seven days a week.

Thank you,

City of Tallahassee Utilities

March 23, 2021 -- Communication from City Utilities

CITY OF TALLAHASSEE

Dear City of Tallahassee Utility Customer,

Last week, Leon County launched its emergency assistance program, which can provide up to 15 months of rent and utility assistance for income-eligible applicants. If you have been economically impacted by COVID-19, you may be eligible for critical financial support.

According to our records, your City of Tallahassee utility account currently carries an outstanding balance, which now makes your account subject to disconnect. **If you need financial assistance to address your bill, visit LeonCountyCares.com to apply for these federal funds today. Funds are limited.**

Whether you apply for funding or not, immediate action is required by you to avoid disconnection of services.

- To make a utility payment, visit Talgov.com/YOU. We offer a variety of ways for you to pay your utility bill online, by text or by phone.
- For questions about your bill and to work directly with our specially trained customer care representatives, call 850-891-4968. We are here to serve you from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., seven days a week. Our team can help connect you to available federal funds and local community resources, as well as help establish a payment agreement that works for you.

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Thank you,

City of Tallahassee Utilities

April 2021 -- Canvassing Efforts Begin

Public Records Request - Past-due Utility Accounts Inbox × Utilities Campaign ×

Shelby Green <greenshelby@gmail.com> Thu, Apr 8, 6:57 PM

to Jim

Good evening Mr. Cooke,

I am a volunteer with the Providence Neighborhood Association. We are preparing to launch a coordinated canvassing event with some other Neighborhood Associations in town to ensure residents have heard about the resumption of utility disconnections and the County's CARES program.

In preparation for this coordinated event, I would like to receive a spreadsheet of all utility customers that have a past-due account balance. I believe this number should be around 10,000, but I am not 100% sure. I would like the spreadsheet to include as much information as possible. I am aware of F.S. 119.071, so I understand the removal of confidential information. At the very least, I would like fields for name, address, account balance, and last invoice amount.

Thank you for your time and help.

Best,
Shelby Green

April 2021 -- Canvassing Efforts Begin

04302021_pastdue_walklist

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J20

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	_id	Short_Address	Unit	AccountBalance	PastDueAmount	LastInvoiceAmount	account_type
2	410270 A0180	1226 Hutchinson St	NA	2313.93	1945.95	367.98	past due
3	410230 I0090	1228 McCaskill Ave	NA	3494.21	3273.49	220.72	past due
4	410230 L0050	1235 McCaskill Ave	NA	2838.84	2611.27	227.57	past due
5	410270 B0030	1309 Hutchinson St	NA	4321.33	3975.79	345.54	past due
6	4102330000040	1313 Lake Ave	Unit 1	2989.43	2637.24	352.19	past due
7	4102330000030	1313 Lake Ave	Unit B	2525.27	2286.59	238.68	past due
8	410230 M0050	1321 McCaskill Ave	NA	2651.4	2448.47	202.93	past due
9	410270 B0110	1341 Hutchinson St	NA	3459.51	3059.06	400.45	past due
10	410230 P0072	1511 Lake Ave	NA	2608.57	2142.62	465.95	past due
11	41023507H0000	1514 Lake Ave	NA	4413.74	3802.16	611.58	past due
12	41023507C0000	1525 McCaskill Ave	Apt 1	2475.01	2337.7	137.31	past due
13	4102060000050	1529 Lake Ave	NA	2470.19	2265.75	204.44	past due
14	4102020000040	1550 Levy Ave	NA	3037.08	2818.32	218.76	past due
15	410230 P0083	1601 Lake Ave	NA	3596.91	3254.99	341.92	past due
16	410230 E0062	1602 Stuckey Ave	Apt 2114	2308.55	2157.04	151.51	past due
17	410230 O0082	1607 McCaskill Ave	Apt 6	2700.29	2598.76	101.53	past due
18	410230 P0088	1619 Lake Ave	Apt 10D	3212.33	2952.49	259.84	past due
19	410230 P0088	1619 Lake Ave	Apt 4C	2398.56	2217.81	180.75	past due
20	4102750000070	1635 McCaskill Ave	NA	2879.59	2606.07	273.52	past due
21	410230 E0080	1698 Stuckey Ave	Apt 13	2396.69	2173.54	223.15	past due
22	410230 O0010	1802 Highland St	NA	2977.63	2769.15	208.48	past due
23	410280 B0160	2008 Warwick St	NA	4176.81	3913.9	262.91	past due
24	410280 C0140	2013 Warwick St	NA	3345.21	3101.51	243.7	past due
25	410270 D0330	2015 Hillsborough St	NA	2449.81	2211.96	237.85	past due
26	410270 D0050	2016 Holmes St	NA	2473.93	2047.98	425.95	past due

April 2021 -- Presenting Findings to City Commission

April-July 2021 -- Presenting Findings to City Commission

Brief prepared by Shelby Green
Send comments to greenshelby@gmail.com

9098 City of Tallahassee Utility customers are behind on their bill.

Statement of Impact
9098 households are behind[1] on their utility bill. 20% of them live in 32304, the poorest zip code in the State of Florida. This brief provides an initial investigation on measures the elected Board of City Commissioners can take to address this critical issue and reach the goal of 0% utility cutoffs for residents.

Fiscal Impact
The total delinquent[2] amount past due is $5,795,105 (as of 5/05/2021). 38% lower since the City Commission unanimously voted to end the moratorium on utility disconnections[3].

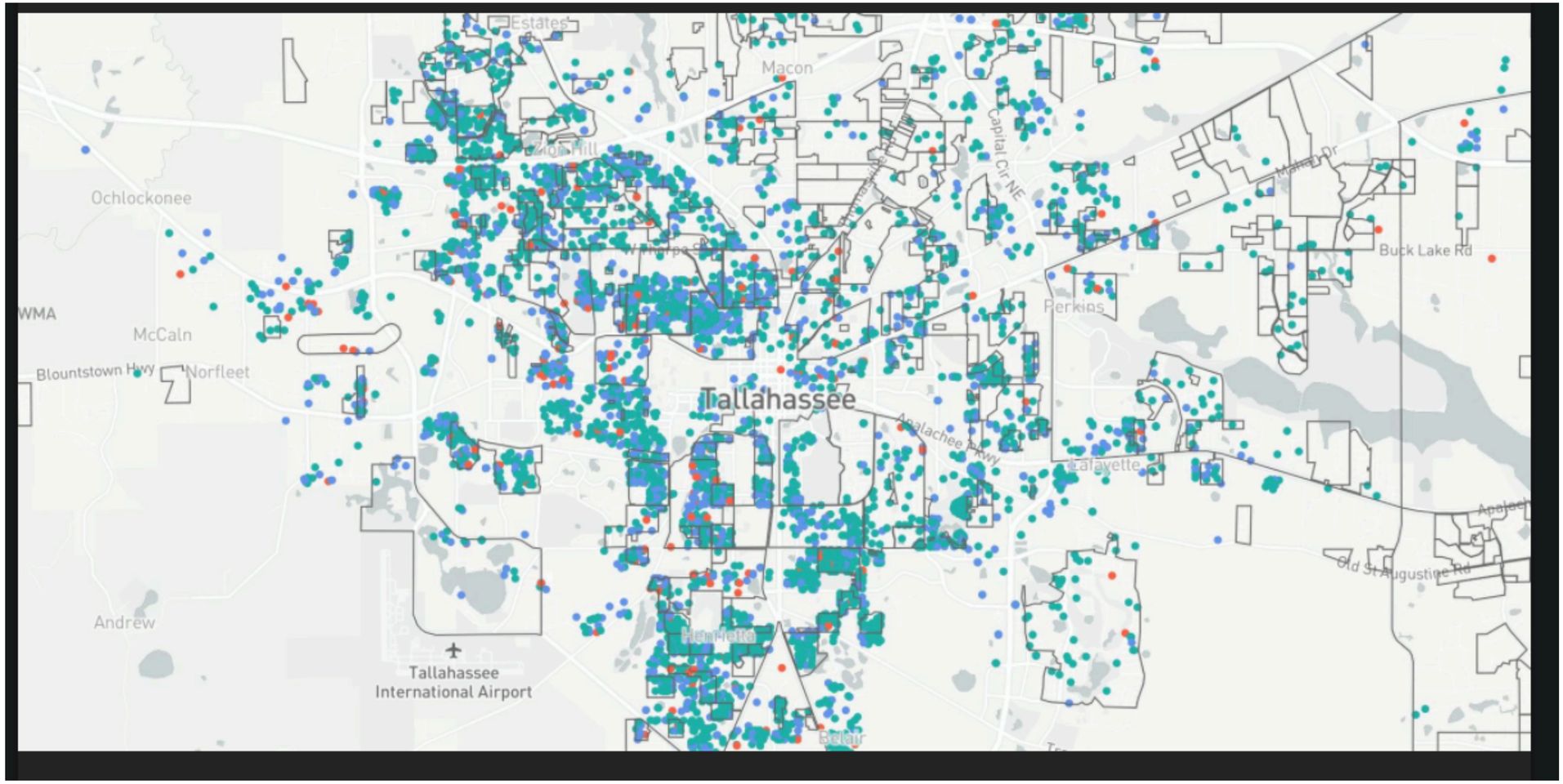
Recommendation
Option C: Reinstate the utility moratorium and extend the moratorium until additional funds from the Federal level are administered at the local level, ensuring at least 50% of customers with past due utility accounts receive funds from the program.

Report and Discussion

Background:
At the February 24, 2021 meeting of the Board of City Commissioners, **the City Commission voted 5-0 to authorize staff to resume utility disconnects for non-payment**, with three caveats:

1. Customers are provided a 60-day advance notice prior to utility disconnect.
2. [Staff is] to work with customers to apply for U.S. Treasury utility and rent assistance funds.
3. [Staff is] to establish payment agreements with utility customers on a case-by-case basis.

April-July 2021 -- Presenting Findings to City Commission



April-July 2021 -- Presenting Findings to City Commission

Our Florida is not being advertised as a relief option. And it should. Inbox × Utilities Campaign ×

Shelby Green <greenshelby@gmail.com> Fri, May 21, 11:23 AM

to mayor, Jeremy, Dianne, Curtis, Jacqueline, Reese, James

Good morning Board,

I hope you all enjoyed your holiday and happy belated Florida Emancipation Day.

This morning, **I called the City's Customer Service Department to find out if the Our Florida program was being advertised** and communicated to residents behind on their utility bill. The representative said, "**We haven't received anything as far as OurFlorida**... Is it a social agency on its own?" Our Florida has $800M to distribute to Florida residents who need help paying off their past due utility and rent balances. They started processing applications this Monday, May 17th.

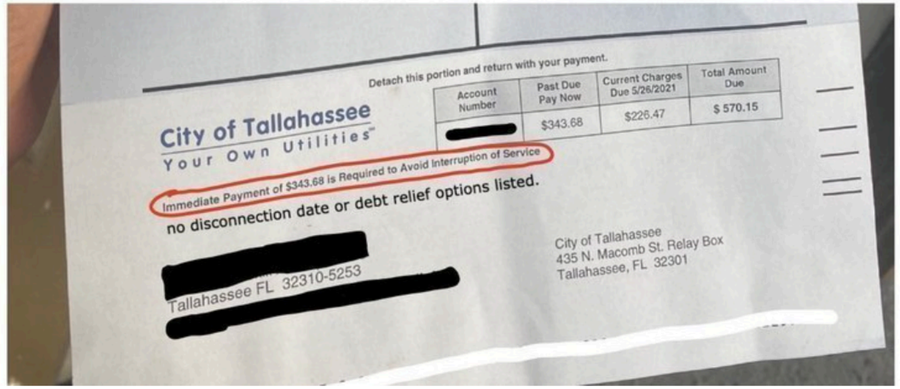
It's unfortunate that our City is not advertising this program through its Departments or its social media accounts. When I asked the representative how to encourage the advertisement of this program, she said, "**That needs to go by the Commissioners.** You need to speak with City Hall.".

My formal request: please encourage the City's Communications, Customer Operations, Neighborhood Affairs, Resilience, and Utility departments to advertise this program. I would like to see explicit application directions in the Insights Newsletter, on the City's social media accounts, through Department newsletters and emails, and as an option when residents call the City Utilities/Customer Operations phone line.

Best,
Shelby

April-July 2021 -- Presenting Findings to City Commission

RESIDENTS DESERVE TO KNOW WHEN THEIR POWER WILL BE TURNED OFF & OPTIONS TO PREVENT IT.



Shelby Green started this petition to Tallahassee City Commission and 3 others

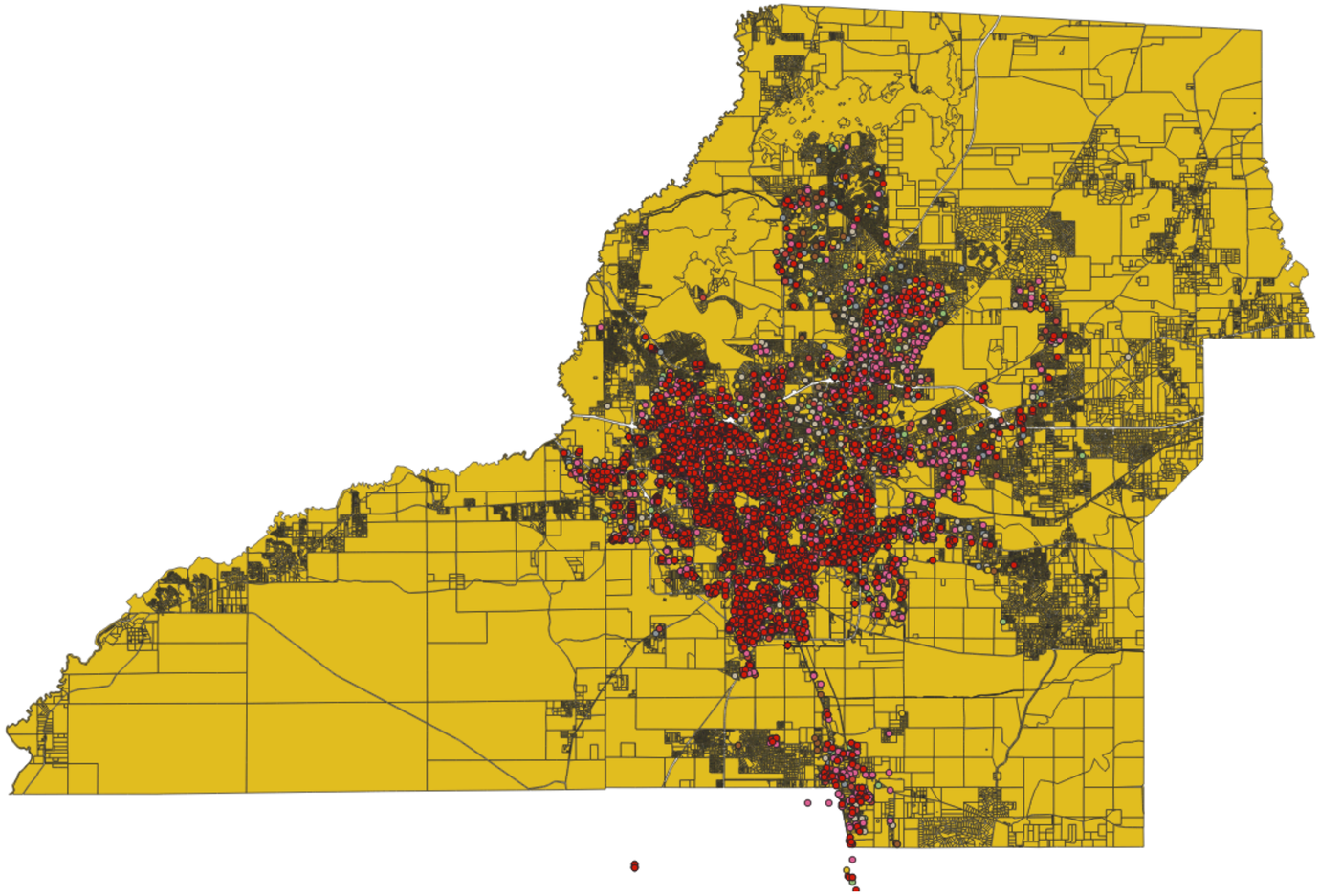
Our neighbors, almost 8,000 of them, are behind on their utility bill. Some are forgoing family reunions; picking up extra shifts; or sitting without AC, just to keep their lights on. **Sign this petition to ask our City of Tallahassee Mayor and Commissioners to improve their communications with residents at risk of disconnection**. The action needed is a simple one: modify utility bills to include what day disconnection will occur, and include information about debt relief options and resources that are available to residents.

Observed Issues:

- Relief programs, like Our Florida and LIHEAP program, are still relatively unknown
- Difficulty applying for relief funds (due to lack of resources and access to landlord for document verification)
- Difficulty preventing shutoff while waiting for Our Florida / LIHEAP application approval and fund disbursement

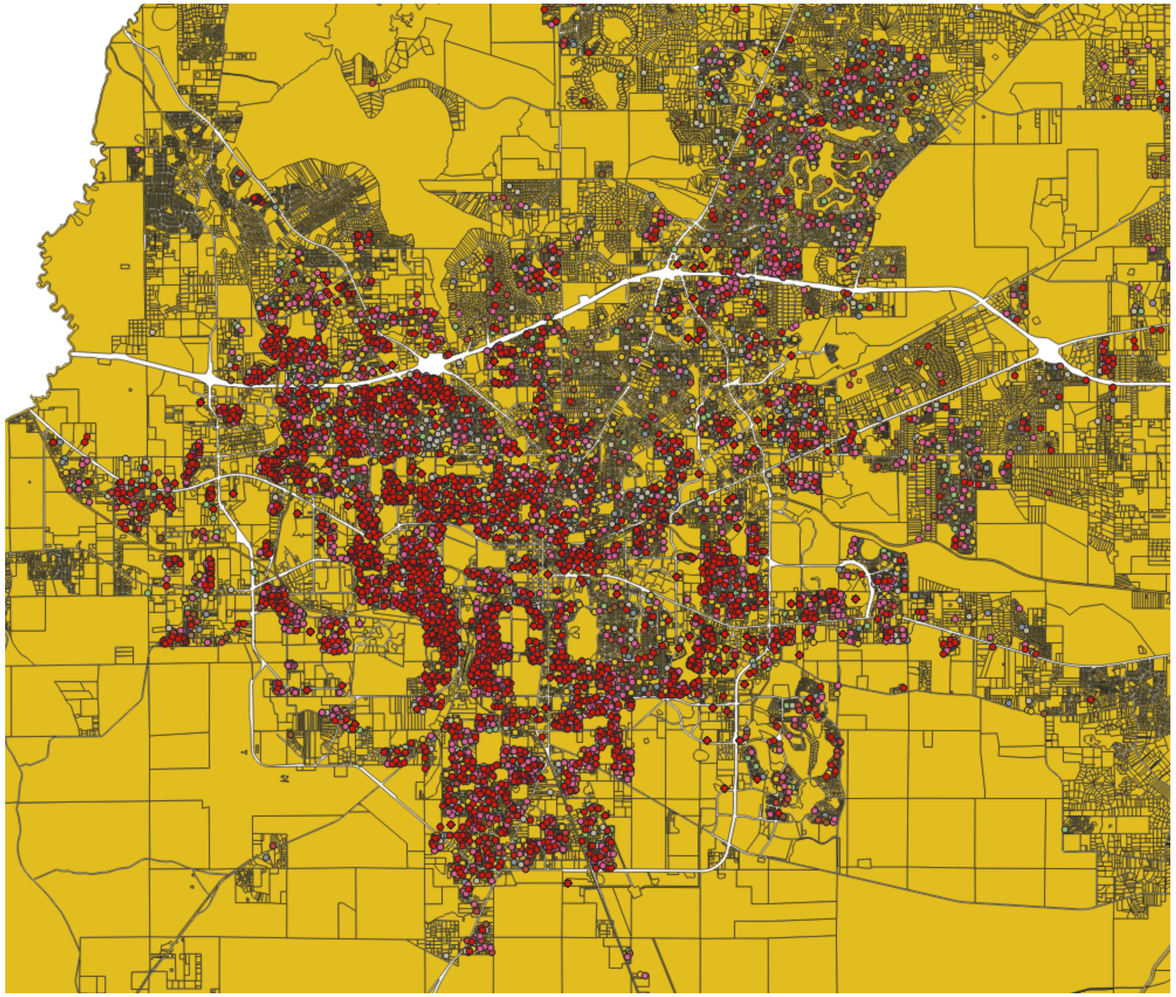
Observed Issues:

- Over 33,000 utility shutoffs in 2021 — that could have been prevented if residents had access or knowledge of relief funds



Observed Issues:

- Over 33,000 utility shutoffs in 2021 — that could have been prevented if residents had access or knowledge of relief funds



Observed Issues:

- According to the Anatomy of a Homicide report, 46% of offenders committed crimes because they were trying to get money to buy groceries or pay bills -- like their utility bill -- for themselves and their families. 87% of homicides occurred within City limits.

Possible information & formal solutions

- Problem: Relief programs, like Our Florida and LIHEAP program, are still relatively unknown
  - Printing relief options on utility bills — just for residents with a balance over $100
  - Printing relief options on the newsletter insert
  - Sending relief options to neighborhood associations to forward information

- Difficulty applying for relief funds (due to lack of resources and access to landlord for document verification)
  - Develop “application office hours” with local non-profits and Our Florida/DCF?

- Difficulty preventing shutoff while waiting for Our Florida / LIHEAP application approval and fund disbursement
  - Formalizing agreement that City Utilities has with Michael Walton and standardizing it / making it more available to ratepayers

What is most feasible? What would next steps look like?