



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jen Metzger

Local Experts Join Senator Metzger's Online Series to Help Constituents Navigate Mental Health and Utility Service Issues during COVID-19

JEN METZGER May 16, 2020

| ISSUE: **COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS, MENTAL HEALTH, UTILITY ISSUES, ONLINE SERIES, COVID-19**

Hudson Valley and Catskills, NY...State Senator Jen Metzger (SD-42) hosted two episodes of her COVID-19 **Community Conversations** online series this week to discuss two different but important concerns that many people are confronting during this pandemic — how to manage stress and anxiety in this challenging time, and how to manage utility bill payments.

Streamed live on **Senator Metzger's Facebook page**, the series features local experts addressing COVID-19 topics important to Hudson Valley and Catskill communities. Metzger was joined **on Tuesday** by Dr. Amy Nitza and Dr. Karla Vermeulen from the **Institute for Disaster Mental Health (IDMH) at SUNY New Paltz** to discuss mental health awareness during an event of this magnitude. IDMH's respective Director and Deputy Director were clear in pointing out that the novel coronavirus pandemic is different from other disasters, such as natural disasters that have a clear ending, and that the prolonged feeling of a lack of safety and certainty sets this crisis apart from others.

The trio also discussed the isolation that comes with social distancing, the benefits of

limiting media exposure when the news gets overwhelming, coping with the financial stress many are experiencing, and more, all while providing resources and advice to manage the crisis' impact. IDMH has created tip sheets since the public health crisis began in New York, all of which are available in the Mental Health section of [Senator Metzger's COVID-19 Information and Resource Guide](#) for constituents.

In [Thursday evening's discussion](#), Senator Metzger welcomed Laurie Wheelock, Esq., Deputy General Counsel for the Public Utility Law Project (PULP) to share information with viewers who may be concerned about losing their water, electric, gas, or telecommunications utility services due to the economic impacts of the pandemic on their livelihood. Wheelock addressed what rights and protections are available for utility customers and made recommendations for what people can do to keep their essential services from being shut-off. In some cases, landlords have terminated utilities due to unpaid rent during the state's moratorium on evictions, which is not permitted, and Wheelock shared that tenants should call the [Department of Public Service's](#) emergency hotline at (800) 342-3355 to file a complaint and request an immediate turn-on. Wheelock also recommended that people having trouble paying their utility bills may now qualify for the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), which has been extended through June 30. As she noted, HEAP customers also receive discounts on their electricity bills, which will help making payments more manageable.

"Both of this week's Community Conversations addressed issues that generate an immense amount of stress, and I'm hopeful that Amy and Karla from IDMH and Laurie from PULP were able to provide viewers with information to make this challenging time a bit more manageable," **said Senator Metzger.**

Amy Nitza, Director of the Institute of Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz said, "the mental health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are widespread and are likely to

continue for the foreseeable future. It is very important that we begin addressing this issue now by providing people with the information and resources they need to cope effectively and to access professional support. We are grateful for Senator Metzger's leadership on this topic and the opportunity to share our work with her constituents."

"The Public Utility Law Project thanks Senator Metzger for inviting us to be part of her 'Community Conversations' series," **said Laurie Wheelock, Deputy General Counsel of PULP.**

"During the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis, New Yorkers need to know their rights as utility consumers and how you can protect yourself against service shut-offs, such as by applying for the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP).“ “Many New York State residents are rightly concerned that falling behind on their bills may result in the loss of essential services such as their gas, electric, water and phone/cable/internet once the State's “New York on PAUSE” policy ends,” she continued. “PULP will be there to help them, and the residents of the 42nd Senate District.”

Senator Metzger's [Community Conversations](#) series will continue to occur [via Facebook live](#), streaming twice-weekly on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 5:00 PM, and additional topical episodes in the series will be announced as New York State continues to grapple with the novel coronavirus global pandemic. Next Tuesday's episode will cover [Preventing Senior Scams and Sharing Legal Resources](#).

###