Explanation:
This bill reinstates a moratorium on utility shut-offs until June 30, 2022, for New Yorkers who have experienced financial hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The bill also guarantees these New Yorkers the right to negotiate a deferred payment agreement without down payments, late fees, or penalties.

New York’s utility shut-off moratorium expired on December 21, 2021, leaving countless state residents still behind on their utility bills at risk of losing access to essential services. As waves of new COVID-19 variants continue to put public health at risk, all New Yorkers need clean water, heat, and electricity in their homes to stay healthy.

The scale of utility debt that has built up across the state is enormous. As of October 2021, 1.2 million New Yorkers owed $1.7 billion in energy arrears. The amount of water debt is likely nearly as high. In Buffalo, there were over 30,000 households in water arrears as of July 2021. Customers of the Suffolk County Water Authority cumulatively owed over $30 million at the end of 2021.

New Yorkers facing crushing utility debt need to be protected while they get back on their feet financially, especially since some state aid to eliminate arrears has yet to be disbursed. New York only began accepting applications for the Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) on December 1, and it is unclear how much of the program’s $70 million in funding to eliminate water debt has reached vulnerable New Yorkers.

Due to the time needed to help New Yorkers recover from the COVID-19 economic crisis, we recommend that this legislation be strengthened to prohibit all utility shut-offs until June 2023.

Summary:
This act amends the public service law to prohibit termination of utility services for New Yorkers who have experienced financial hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic.