

Utilities required to boost protections for hardship customers after power shut-offs double in portions of Connecticut

By JOSH KOVNER
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The commission that regulates electric rates on Wednesday ordered Eversource and United Illuminating Co. to take immediate steps to ensure that struggling families who are already eligible for hardship protection don't have their lights and heat shut off during the winter months.

But despite a well-publicized run-up to what advocates are calling an extraordinarily responsive ruling by the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority, people who are eligible for long established hardship programs are still losing service without being told of their options by the utilities.

"And time is of the essence," said U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal. He wrote in support of PURA's decision to require the electric companies to adopt call center scripts that discuss hardship eligibility, explain the eligibility criteria in clear, single-page summaries and hold informational meetings, at night, in the hardest hit communities where the families who need the help most are located.

"Just in the past two months, my office has handled dozens of customers who are facing electric-power shut-offs," Blumenthal wrote in comments filed with PURA.

He noted there are thousands of Connecticut residents who are financially eligible for hardship protection "yet are not identified by the utilities as hardship cases."

We must do more to reach those individuals," Blumenthal wrote.

Utility shut-offs in north central Connecticut doubled to more than 80,000 between 2014 and 2018, according to Eversource's records.

State Attorney General William Tong said in written comments that he supports PURA's outreach efforts and asked that the authority also take the opportunity to alert customers to what he said was "an explosive increase" in robocall utility scams that threaten customers with disconnection unless an immediate and untraceable payment is made to the scammer.

"These scams disproportionately impact low-income customers who may already struggle to keep current with their electric bills and may undermine hardship-customer trust in their utilities," Tong wrote.

PURA adopted his suggestion.

In her written comments, lawyer Bonnie Roswig of the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford mentioned PURA's focus on a series of Connecticut laws that already contain "very specific mandates relative to energy affordability and equity."

"As the authority noted, hardship classification 'is the gateway to a range of existing protections for eligible customers,' " she said.

Roswig said the new call center scripts, the concise, one-page descriptions of eligibility requirements and the community meetings would help create a bridge to a stressed, underserved community.

Eversource, in its comments filed with PURA, did not object to the order. The utility touted its own outreach programs and said it looks forward "to continuing to work cooperatively with PURA, the Connecticut Department of Social Services ... and other health and human service organizations to ensure our most vulnerable customers are aware of existing available services."

Marissa Gillett, appointed in April as PURA's chair, told The Courant last week that she "intends for the responsiveness of this agency to increase dramatically," and that the "rapid release" and "comprehensiveness" of the proposed decision "are indicative of that."

The order, released in draft form last week, followed a Nov. 1 hearing in which advocates testified about customers losing service despite being eligible for hardship protection.

PURA has expressed concern about the lack of recognition, or "coding" of the hardship customers.

"Although the exact number of residential customers who qualify ... [for] hardship status is currently unknown, the data presented suggests there is a significant population of eligible customers who have not been identified as such, and therefore are not currently participating in the existing utility arrearage forgiveness programs or the Winter Protection Plan," the authority wrote in the order adopted Wednesday.

"It is evident that not all residential customers who struggle financially to pay their energy bills are aware of the full range of payment options and energy assistance programs available to them," PURA said.

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