

## After power shut-offs in portions of Connecticut double, regulators seek to make utilities do more to ensure poor families get hardship protection

By JOSH KOVNER  
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The commission that regulates electricity rates, troubled that utility shut-offs doubled to more than 80,000 from 2014 to 2018 in north central Connecticut alone, has asked Eversource and United Illuminating to take steps to ensure families eligible for hardship protection are getting it and not sitting in the dark as winter approaches.

The Public Utilities Regulatory Authority's proposed decision, issued Wednesday, surprised and delighted advocates who've been trying to get hardship protection for tens of thousands of people who are eligible but whose status hasn't been properly recognized, or "coded," by the utilities.

PURA has asked the two major power companies to prepare a script that call centers would use when talking to customers to determine and recognize hardship eligibility; to prepare single-page, straight-forward explanations on hardship criteria; and to hold community meetings, at night, in the neighborhoods where the people who need the information and assistance the most are located.

**"It's an extraordinary decision. They heard us. It reflects what PURA's new priorities will be," said lawyer Bonnie Roswig of the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford.**

The Courant reported on a clinic for struggling families in October run by Roswig and other advocates and a PURA hearing in November where it was revealed that 436,000 people in the Hartford metro area were eligible for income-based energy assistance programs that can erase delinquencies on bills and protect families from shut-offs during the winter months.

But in their proposed decision, PURA Chairwoman Marissa Gillett and commissioners John Betkoski III and Michael Caron noted: "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.

"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."

"If hardship status serves as a 'gateway' for the [power companies] in identifying qualified customers for utility hardship programs, it is critical [that there be an] explicit understanding of the information and options being communicated by ... customer service representatives to customers who may be eligible for hardship status," a portion of the decision reads. Citing testimony from the Nov. 1 PURA hearing by Roswig and Leticia Colon de Mejias of Efficiency For All, the proposed decision said this is "a first step in a comprehensive approach to improve energy affordability and equity in the state."

Gillett, appointed in April as PURA's chair, told the Courant Thursday that she "intends for the responsiveness of this



*Barbara Vega wipes tears while meeting with Jeff Dorman, an Aetna attorney who helped Vega navigate a process with Connecticut Natural Gas representatives to create a more manageable energy bill for the mother of four. (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)*

agency to increase dramatically,” and that the “rapid release” and “comprehensiveness” of the proposed decision “are indicative of that.”

Gillett said she has been working with state Sen. Gary Winfield, D-New Haven, and others to identify the best spots to hold the community meetings called for in the proposed order. She said intends to go to the meetings.

Written comments, including any exceptions to the proposed order by the utilities, are due Monday. After considering the feedback, PURA will take a final vote on the order Wednesday.

While the regulators are asking the utilities to do significantly more, Eversource cited its existing programs.

“While we’re still reviewing PURA’s draft decision, we support additional effective outreach efforts and will continue to work cooperatively with our regulators and health and human services organizations to ensure our most vulnerable customers are aware of the services available,” said Tricia Taskey Modifica, an Eversource spokesperson. “We have longstanding programs to assist hardship customers and we regularly share that information through bill inserts, advertising, media and social media because we want all customers who are eligible to take full advantage of our programs that can help.”

A United Illuminating representative said the company was reviewing the proposed decision.

Colon de Mejias testified at the November hearing that the energy affordability gap has continued to grow in limited-income communities, “often leaving [families] with no power and no heat, and resulting in unacceptable levels of eviction which further burden families with children or disabilities.”

“In serving this population, I see their struggles regularly identifying families who choose between paying for heat, food, or medical treatment,” she testified.

**Roswig testified that to her ears, the lack of affordable electricity and natural gas equates to “human suffering.”**

**She said Thursday that people eligible for winter protection but not coded as such are still getting their utilities turned off. In a case earlier this week, a Hartford-area mother with a sick child had her utilities disconnected over a delinquency of \$185, Roswig said. When the mother spoke with Eversource on the phone about the disconnection, there was no discussion about her eligibility for hardship protection, Roswig said.**

“I told her to call Eversource back and tell them the children’s advocacy lawyer said to code you for hardship. She did that, and I have to follow up today on how that went,” she said Thursday. “This afternoon, I’m driving back to the office from another hearing and I get a voice mail: Pregnant mother, hardship eligible, gas heat turned off.”

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