

Campbell: Eversource is like that bad boyfriend

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Sometimes, some of the state's public utilities - which aren't really all that public- have all the makings of a bad boyfriend. A bad boyfriend doesn't call. He doesn't write. He does what he wants when he wants and then when you call him on it, he apologizes profusely, and then goes back to doing what he was doing in the first place.

If you're smart, you leave that boyfriend in the dust.

But if that boyfriend is your electric company, well, things get complicated.

Take, for instance, Eversource, king of bad boyfriends. If you are a Connecticut utilities customer and are struggling to meet your bills, you could be excused for not knowing there are multiple, state-mandated ways to get help. Your utility company isn't being forthcoming, and even if you call the company, you may not get the information you need. Advocates have tried, and they find themselves educating the person who is supposed to answer customers' questions.

At the very least, that's just bad communication. This past week, the state agency charged with oversight of the states' utilities, Public Utilities Regulatory Authority, ruled among other things, to extend the state's shut-off moratorium (instituted at the beginning of the pandemic) to October 1, and any customer who is about to have utilities shut off must first receive a text or email that specifically explains programs that can get that customer out of arrears, and keep the utilities on.

The ruling, which was a response to a motion filed by Connecticut Legal Services Inc., and the Center for Children's Advocacy, also said that utilities must publish press releases and notify customers individually about available payment or energy assistance. That assistance includes proactively offering qualifying, low-income customers special payment plans which can drop their monthly payments to as low as \$75. You can be excused if you didn't know about that, either. PURA will investigate past communication, and that includes customer call recordings, if PURA asks for them.

It's a 2,631-word smackdown.

But there's a more lawyerly way of saying this.

"PURA took an essential step today in extending the moratorium from utility termination," said Bonnie Roswig, director of the Center for Children's Advocacy Disability Rights Project. "The utility companies must follow PURA's directives and this order includes not only the extension but compliance mandates, specific outreach to vulnerable residents, data reporting and accountability. We are very pleased that PURA took this step to protect the health and well-being of our citizens."

Will the bad boyfriend comply? Stay tuned.

The sad fact is that the state's utilities have been told to improve their communication before. Some have done so. United Illuminating, the electric company for 17 towns, has been proactive about reaching out to community action agencies responsible for helping low-income families. A spokeswoman at New Haven's Christian Community Action, Inc., an ecumenical social service action organization, said the company has reached out to her with information about assistance programs and payment arrangements for customers who need it. UI also posts an extensive list of assistance programs on their website.

And then there's Eversource. Ah, Eversource, with its 149 towns and its spotty record for customer communication.

This is a critical time and people need help and they need to know how to access that help. Connecticut's unemployment rate hovers at a historical high around 10%, similar to the nation's. The state Department of Labor hired more people to

handle the glut of unemployment claims. FEMA (yes, FEMA) approved an extra \$300 per week to Connecticut residents who lost their jobs because of COVID-19.

There is a state-mandated winter moratorium for shut-offs, even though last year, according to Roswig, 93,000 customers had their service terminated. How smaller a figure might that have been had customers known the programs available to them? This nonsense predated the pandemic, but COVID has only made things worse, according to advocates who work with low-income families. A moratorium on shut-offs was declared by executive order on March 10, then was extended. The winter moratorium takes effect in November and stretches to May. In that time, the hope is the customer will figure out an arrangement plan that is workable for them and the utility.

Of course we should all pay our bills, on time, every month. But the state is in economic freefall from the pandemic. Roswig said PURA even issued a script for utilities to use, but that didn't get much traction. And the result? Low-income families run the risk of losing their utilities for lack of payment, even when they don't have to.

As an experiment, try reaching out to Eversource. I've tried to talk to board members, but they don't return calls, emails, or pleas on Twitter. It's indicative of the company's stone wall. They don't care. They don't have to. And if they ignore this ruling from PURA, what will happen? Another smackdown?

The Connecticut Working Families Party has called on the state to take over the state's utilities. Think about that the next time a wind blows through and you lose power just long enough to have your freezer food spoil. Then ask yourself if a for-profit company is up to the task. For all some voters' concerns about state-run agencies and organizations, if a for-profit company cannot deliver a basic need, maybe it's time to think differently.