



Campbell: 'The stakes here are enormous.' Eversource customers need to know aid options

Susan Campbell Nov. 28, 2020

When Tropical Storm Isaias swept through Connecticut this summer, power went out for roughly 700,000 customers, and it took 10 days for all the lights to go back on again.

Eversource, with 1.2 million Connecticut customers, took the brunt of state residents' criticism for a lack of preparedness (which company spokespeople insisted was unfair criticism) and poor communication skills (which company spokespeople acknowledged could have been better).

We're months away from those dark days and while subsequent power outages have been few, public utilities -- Eversource in particular -- still fall short on communicating effectively with their customers. Connecticut's public utilities have a host of payment programs for people who've fallen behind on their bills - and with a state unemployment rate that's hovering around 6%, that's a significant number of people. But utilities continue to do a poor job of educating their customers, according to people who work with low-income families, and the state agency charged with overseeing the utilities, the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority, or PURA.

In the past few weeks, a flurry of motions, filings, letters and procedural orders have passed between PURA and big companies such as Eversource and Connecticut Natural Gas. Some of those documents include a script with precise language that the companies' call center employees are to use when a customer calls asking for help.

Isn't it sad, that a well-heeled company like Eversource doesn't know how to talk to customers?

If you randomly call and ask for help, "you may (or may not) get a customer service representative who tells you what's available," says Bonnie Roswig, director of the Center for Children's Advocacy Disability Rights Project.

In fact, there's a lot that is available. There are payment plans peculiar to the pandemic (24 months to pay a back bill - no questions asked), payment plans for people whose income is less than 60% of the state's median income, and payment plans for people who are on public assistance (\$50 a month).

But how would a customer know this if the company isn't saying so, clearly? What should be a simple phone call becomes a guessing game where the customer must already know precisely what is available prior to the call?

"As PURA noted, call center representatives still aren't always providing the required information to callers seeking assistance," said Roswig. "Callers should not have to know the secret password in order to be advised of programs that have been ordered by PURA. The stakes here are enormous. If customers don't know about existing options, they may feel pressured to enter into unaffordable programs."

And if the customer can't pay, Eversource has let PURA know the company intends to resume disconnections again in January. They've asked for a PURA decision by early December so they can - Oh! The irony! - be sure to let customers know with their first mailing in January.

After reviewing recent corporate communication to customers, one missive from PURA's Office of Education, Outreach, and Enforcement (EOE) suggested utilities do less self-congratulation and more education. Is this corporate arrogance? Or is it a ploy to ask for more money later because of all these people who didn't pay their bills?

"I always wanted them to listen to what I said because they think they know everything," said State Sen. Norman Needleman, who in August called for the resignation of Eversource's CEO, James Judge. "They think they are doing everything

perfectly, and I know there are so many areas where they can improve.

“You can’t run your business in Connecticut as you do in Boston or New York,” said Needleman. “The model here is every different.”

Needleman’s call for Judge’s resignation was more than political theater. The buck, Needleman said at the time, stops at the top of an organization. Needleman, who made his money in effervescent products such as denture cleaners, has been a boss long enough to know that when things go awry, it’s best to admit it and learn from your mistakes.

Judge didn’t quit, and Eversource went back to being, well, Eversource. **While the company insists that inserts in bill envelopes that alert customers to payment plans are sufficient, Roswig gently reminds us that if you’re unable to pay a bill, you don’t tend to open the envelope. Those inserts go unread into the recycle bin.**

This is reaching critical mass. “I am trying to get them to the point where their customers don’t hate them,” said Needleman.

Good luck, Sen. Needleman. As we head toward winter, there’s no sign that Eversource is becoming more customer-friendly, particularly for its customers who are struggling financially.

Per PURA’s directives, now, before a service can be shut off for non-payment, customers must be notified by mail and any other means which the customer has shared with the company (texts, emails and the like). In that communication must be detailed explanations of the various means by which the customer can catch up on payments. Bills must also include the full amount of what the customer owes the company. Starting in December and going through the first week of February, on the first Wednesday of every month electric and gas companies must issue a press release and post on their social media accounts information about hardship and COVID-19 payment programs.

The EOE will be watching. As Roswig says, "PURA’s orders very directly state that the companies are to proactively assist customers to get into affordable payment arrangements and to advise callers about accessing energy assistance and help from Operation Fuel. If the companies are not doing that every time a customer calls, then they are not doing their job."