

# COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION COMMONWEALTH KEYSTONE BUILDING 400 NORTH STREET, HARRISBURG, PA 17120

BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION & ENFORCEMENT 3038060

March 19, 2024

# Via Electronic Filing

Rosemary Chiavetta, Secretary Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission Commonwealth Keystone Building 400 North Street Harrisburg, PA 17120

Re: Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, Bureau of Investigation and

Enforcement's Investigation of PPL Electric Utilities Corporation for potential violations of 52 Pa. Code § 56.1, et seq., of the Commission's

regulations and 66 Pa.C.S. § 1501 of the Public Utility Code

Docket No. M-2023-3038060

**I&E Reply Comments** 

Dear Secretary Chiavetta:

Enclosed for electronic filing is the **Reply Comments of the Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement** in the above-referenced matter.

Copies have been served on the parties of record and interested parties in accordance with the Certificate of Service. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Michael L. Swindler Deputy Chief Prosecutor Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement PA Attorney ID No. 43319 (717) 783-6369

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MLS/ac Enclosures

cc: Office of Special Assistants (via email only – <u>ra-OSA@pa.gov</u> – Word Version)
Per Certificate of Service

# BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISISON

Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, :

Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement

v. : Docket No. M-2023-3038060

:

PPL Electric Utilities Corporation

# REPLY COMMENTS OF THE BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION AND ENFORCEMENT

#### TO THE HONORABLE PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION:

## I. INTRODUCTION

On November 21, 2023, pursuant to 52 Pa. Code §§ 3.113(b)(3), 5.41 and 5.232, the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission's ("Commission" or "PUC") Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement ("I&E") and PPL Electric Utilities Corporation ("PPL" or "Company") filed a Joint Petition for Approval of Settlement ("Settlement" or "Settlement Agreement") at the above docket to amicably resolve I&E's informal investigation regarding a system-wide billing issue discovered in December 2022. I&E's investigation was initially based upon information provided by the Commission's Bureau of Consumer Services ("BCS"), supplemented by I&E's own investigation which resulted in a Settlement comprised of a substantial monetary civil penalty and numerous remedial measures— both monetary and non-monetary—as set forth therein and as supported by accompanying Statements in Support expressing the individual views of I&E and PPL.

From its Public Meeting held January 18, 2024, the Commission entered an Order to seek public comment on the Settlement Agreement, consistent with the requirement imposed in 52 Pa. Code § 3.113(b)(3), before issuing its Final Order ("January 18 Order"). Pursuant to the January 18 Order, interested parties had twenty-five (25) days following publication of the January 18 Order in the *Pennsylvania Bulletin* to submit comments. The January 18 Order was published in the *Pennsylvania Bulletin* on February 3, 2024. Accordingly, comments were due on or before February 28, 2024. Numerous comments were filed.

I&E now files the instant Reply Comments consistent with the Commission's recent ruling in *I&E v. Great American Power* where it stated:

[T]he Commission has not rejected the filing of reply comments or similar responsive filings if they are filed in a reasonable time and in compliance with our procedural regulations . . . Therefore, we encourage entities, including I&E, if it so chooses, to pursue procedural compliant methods to make appropriate filings, such as replies to comments in settlement proceedings. *Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement v. Great American Power, LLC*, Docket No. M-2023-3020643 (Order entered September 21, 2023).

I&E deemed it prudent to file the instant Reply Comments to be responsive to the filing of comments by interested parties, to further support this Settlement Agreement.

Despite the numerous challenges and requests set forth by commenters submitting comments pursuant to the Settlement's publication in the *Pennsylvania Bulletin*, it remains I&E's unwavering position that the Parties have provided the support necessary

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 54 Pa.B. 592 (Feb. 3, 2024).

to warrant a Commission finding that the Settlement Agreement is fair, just, reasonable and in the public interest, and should be approved in its entirely without modification.

#### II. REPLY COMMENTS

I&E appreciates that an opportunity was provided to "interested parties" to comment on the Settlement reached between I&E and PPL. It was not unexpected that these comments would contain varying opinions on the terms reached in the Settlement with some suggesting terms that were not included in the Settlement. However, the benchmark of successful negotiations is the compromise of competing positions. I&E and PPL invested many hours crafting terms that would result in a successful resolution. In the end, does it result in satisfying every desire of every commenter? No. Is this Settlement nevertheless in the public interest? Without question.

## A. Summary of Comments

The comments filed to the Settlement Agreement were wide ranging. Some commenters suggested modifications to the Settlement. Some commenters supported the Settlement. Many comments failed to even address the Settlement. Out of all the commenters, the largest group was comprised of individual PPL customers. I&E reviewed each comment and will address the range of issues, as well as provide a brief overview of customer sentiment.

There were 163 comments submitted.<sup>2</sup> Out of the total number of comments, 102, over sixty percent did not actually direct their comments to the terms of the Settlement,

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Out of the 163 Comments submitted, seven of the Comments were received by the Secretary's Bureau after the comment submission deadline of February 28, 4:30 p.m. These Comments were stamped by the Secretary's Bureau with their date of receipt.

but rather shared personal billing issues or concerns about PPL. Such comments, while constructive in PPL's efforts to accommodate the concerns of these customers, are unrelated to the details of this Settlement and a determination of whether the instant Settlement is in the "public interest." As such, this sixty percent of commenters did not oppose the Settlement. Rather than negatively impact this carefully crafted settlement, it should be recognized that these customers have always been afforded the opportunity to file informal or formal complaints with the Commission to address any grievances they may wish to address related to their PPL billing experiences. This process, available to all customers, is a more productive avenue for resolution of their individual concerns. Out of the remaining customers, 61 addressed the Settlement in some form.

The largest group that addressed the Settlement directly requested a refund in some capacity. Approximately 45 people, or three-fourths of the commenters directly addressing the Settlement terms, addressed some form of reimbursement. However, the Settlement, as filed, **does** contain a reimbursement component. In response to the billing issues and this Settlement, PPL refunded, through a one-time line-item credit, approximately One Million Dollars to customers who received estimated bills and were overbilled. Moreover, these individual customers were not/are not precluded from contacting the Company to discuss refunds or from filing their own complaints with the Commission against PPL.

A few commenters suggested modifications to the Settlement as it stands, including a suggestion that PPL be audited. I&E has learned that the Commission's Bureau of Audits is currently in the report drafting phase of a PPL management audit.

While this PPL management audit did not include a billing component, it is I&E's understanding that the Bureau of Audits intends to conduct a follow-up audit to potentially address those issues.

A few commenters suggested that the agreed-to civil penalty of One Million Dollars is not adequate. I&E notes the Commission's Policy Statement which sets forth ten (10) factors ("*Rosi* factors") that the Commission may consider in evaluating whether a civil penalty for violating a Commission order, regulation, or statute is appropriate, as well as whether a proposed settlement for a violation is reasonable and in the public interest. 52 Pa. Code § 69.1201. These factors look at:

- (1) Whether the conduct at issue was of a serious nature. When conduct of a serious nature is involved, such as willful fraud or misrepresentation, the conduct may warrant a higher penalty. When the conduct is less egregious, such as administrative filing or technical errors, it may warrant a lower penalty.
- (2) Whether the resulting consequences of the conduct at issue were of a serious nature. When consequences of a serious nature are involved, such as personal injury or property damage, the consequences may warrant a higher penalty.
- (3) Whether the conduct at issue was deemed intentional or negligent. This factor may only be considered in evaluating litigated cases. When conduct has been deemed intentional, the conduct may result in a higher penalty.
- (4) Whether the regulated entity made efforts to modify internal practices and procedures to address the conduct at issue and prevent similar conduct in the future. These modifications may include activities such as training and improving company techniques and supervision. The amount of time it took the utility to correct the conduct once it was discovered and the involvement of top-level management in correcting the conduct may be considered.
- (5) The number of customers affected and the duration of the violation.

- (6) The compliance history of the regulated entity which committed the violation. An isolated incident from an otherwise compliant utility may result in a lower penalty, whereas frequent, recurrent violations by a utility may result in a higher penalty.
- (7) Whether the regulated entity cooperated with the Commission's investigation. Facts establishing bad faith, active concealment of violations, or attempts to interfere with Commission investigations may result in a higher penalty.
- (8) The amount of the civil penalty or fine necessary to deter future violations. The size of the utility may be considered to determine an appropriate penalty amount.
- (9) Past Commission decisions in similar situations.
- (10) Other relevant factors. 52 Pa. Code § 69.1201(c). The Commission will not apply the factors as strictly in settled cases as in litigated cases. 52 Pa. Code § 69.1201(b).

The intent of applying these *Rosi* factors is to guarantee that the civil penalty imposed will accomplish the goals of further **deterring** actions from this Company or similarly situated utilities in violating the Public Utility Code. The underlying purpose of applying the *Rosi* factors is not in dispute.

Finally, just over 12 percent of commenters expressly voiced support for the Settlement or expressed a hope for a favorable outcome regarding the Settlement.

B. The OCA and CAUSE-PA's Request for Modification to Change Where the Civil Penalty Should be Directed Ignores that the Agreed-Upon Civil Penalty Amount Comports with the Commission's Policy Statement at 52 Pa. Code § 69.1201 and Should Not Be Disturbed

In addition to comments filed by PPL customers, comments requesting modification of the Settlement were also filed by the Office of Consumer Advocate ("OCA") on February 28, 2024, the final day in which the Order sought comments. That

same day, comments requesting modification of the Settlement were also filed by the Coalition for Affordable Utility Services and Energy Efficiency in Pennsylvania ("CAUSE-PA").

First, as the OCA Comments note:

The \$1 million to the General Fund will not resolve the financial harm to customers, but allocation of a portion to the Hardship Fund will tie the penalty to the impact of PPL's actions. The OCA recommends that a portion of the civil penalty be directed to the Hardship Fund. Specifically, the OCA recommends that between \$500,000 - \$750,000 of the penalty be directed to the Hardship Fund and that like the civil penalty, PPL be prohibited from claiming any charitable deduction for this contribution. The OCA is not recommending an increase in the total amount paid by PPL, thus the remainder of the \$1 million would be allocated as a civil penalty.

#### OCA Comments at 9-10.

OCA does not fundamentally disagree with the civil penalty amount brought forth. Instead, OCA argues that having the civil penalty go to the General Fund does not resolve the financial impact to customers. This OCA recommendation is fatally flawed, completely contradicting the express intent of imposing a civil penalty and ignoring several corrective and remedial actions PPL has voluntarily taken in response to the billing issues that have a direct financial impact on customers:

- 1) PPL voluntarily waived all late payment fees for January and February 2023;
- 2) PPL is owed but will not seek to collect approximately \$1.7 million from customers who received estimated bills and were underbilled due to the application of the incorrect rates in the bills that trued up the estimated billing periods;

- 3) PPL refunded, through a one-time line-item credit, approximately \$1.0 million to customers who received estimated bills and were overbilled due to the application of the incorrect rates in the bills that trued up the estimated billing periods;
- 4) PPL on its own initiative did not terminate electric service for any customers for nonpayment from January 2023 through June 2023.

The OCA's suggestion that the civil penalty be distributed to customers is misguided. A monetary civil penalty is intended to be a deterrent factor, as anticipated in *Rosi*. The remedial actions taken by PPL in response to the billing issues already address the alleviation of financial hardship of impacted PPL customers.

### Second, the CAUSE-PA Comments note:

We submit that the proposed Settlement should be modified to explicitly aid PPL's low income customers, who likely experienced disproportionately harmful consequences as a result of the billing errors alleged in the proposed Settlement. Specifically, we urge the Commission to modify the proposed Settlement so that 50% of the \$1 million penalty provided for in the proposed Settlement – or \$500,000 – is directed to PPL's Hardship Fund – Operation HELP.

#### CAUSE-PA Comments at 6.

I&E is surprised and disappointed that OCA and CAUSE-PA posit that a \$250,000 to \$500,000 civil penalty, as they suggest, for a company the size of PPL and for the resulting system-wide impact on customers compounded by the extended duration of the billing issue would adequately satisfy the deterrent standard under the *Rosi* factors.

Interestingly, OCA took a seemingly opposite approach in its comments in *Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement* v. *Columbia Gas of PA, Inc.* at Docket No. M-2022-3012079, where OCA addressed the

civil penalty agreed upon in that Settlement by recommending that the Commission not approve the proposed Settlement before the Commission could reasonably determine whether the agreed-to \$990,000 civil penalty was actually a sufficient deterrent to ensure against future violations.<sup>3</sup> In the *Columbia* matter, the near million dollar civil penalty was not deemed by OCA to be an adequate deterrent, whereas in the instant PPL matter, it believes a \$250,000 civil penalty would suffice. The OCA's inconsistent application of the *Rosi* factors here should be ignored.

The purpose of the civil penalty is to *deter* future violations from the Company and from other utilities. 52 Pa. Code § 69.1201. As discussed, the *Rosi* factors help aid the Commission in deciding whether a civil penalty and proposed Settlement is in the public interest. While the Commission need not apply these factors when considering settlements as opposed to litigated cases, they allow a framework for determining a reasonable and appropriate civil penalty and if the Settlement Agreement is in the public interest.

By filing the Joint Petition for Approval of Settlement, I&E and PPL have declared that they have in good faith negotiated an amicable resolution that benefits the public, the Parties, and this Commission. The primary purpose of the One Million Dollar civil penalty is to serve as an important deterrent from future violations and to serve as a signaling mechanism to other utilities of the consequences of such violations, in line with 52 Pa. Code § 69.1201(c)(8). Allocating the requested amount to a hardship fund would

OCA comments 4–5. *Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement* v. *Columbia Gas of PA, Inc.* at docket No. M-2022-3012079.

severely limit the penalizing impact of the fine. Moreover, directing a portion of the fine to be paid to a general hardship fund does not directly resolve - and has no relevance to - the purported concern for customers actually financial impacted by the billing issue in question. Much more impactful would be for individual complaints to be filed by these impacted customers. Plus, the PPL hardship fund has certain qualifying requirements, thus limiting the customers that would be able to benefit from this allocation and those limited beneficiaries may have no connection to customers actually harmed by the billing issue. Such a fund has no relevance to the subset of customers who may claim to have been impacted by the company's billing issue.

C. The OCA's Claim that the Settlement Does Not Sufficiently Address the Issues Presented Fails to Properly Consider the Steps Taken By PPL as a Result of this Settlement

The OCA avers that the Settlement does not fully address how customers were impacted by PPL actions, specifically that PPL is required to provide safe, safe, adequate and efficient service under Section 1501 of the Public Utility Code; monthly bills pursuant to 56.11, and reasonably accurate estimated bills under 56.12(3). To the contrary, the Settlement makes clear that PPL has taken steps to address fixes to both their customer service deficiencies as well as their billing issues as detailed in the Settlement Agreement. This list includes the following:

- 1) Revising back-office processes to reduce the number of no-bill and multiprimary bills;
- 2) Evaluating the formula to calculate estimates to determine if improvements can be made to the estimation process;

- 3) Creating internal daily control reports on estimated bills, multi-primary bills, and daily meter read rates and operational metrics;
- 4) Developing work arounds to process meter data outside of MDMS when needed, and;
- 5) Enriching MDMS estimations for scenarios where meter data is missing to reduce the time period estimated, and;
- 6) Starting December 18, 2022, PPL customer service representatives were provided with talking points to answer customer questions about the estimated bills.

Furthermore, PPL has agreed not to recover any mitigation costs from Pennsylvania consumers by any future proceeding, device, or means whatsoever when it comes to the costs that were incurred while responding to billing issues. These steps aim to fix the issues and deficiencies that I&E's investigation discovered and are in the interest of the public.

OCA also states that requiring PPL to evaluate the formulas does not commit PPL to any changes. However, as detailed in Appendix C Section 2 of the Settlement, evaluating the formula to calculate estimates to determine if improvements can be made to the estimation process is already in progress and this goal is to minimize the use of estimated bills. Plus, when estimated bills need to be used, this will include prioritizing MDMS estimation over CSS estimation and will include a consideration of how estimated bills impact budget billing customers. It is evident from PPL's actions that it fully intends to implement any changes that will improve its estimate formulation.

Additionally, PPL has agreed to provide BCS with an explanation of how the new formula may impact budget billing customers, if a change is made. This is a reasonably

defined explanation and commitment to examining the formula estimation process and is well within the zone of reasonableness.

Lastly, the OCA also recommends that the Commission consider requiring the Bureau of Audits to investigate whether the fixes identified in the Settlement have been completed and whether additional fixes are necessary to ensure that the situation does not reoccur. As previously addressed, the Commission's Bureau of Audits is already considering such action.

Seeing as OCA and CAUSE-PA do not actually dispute the amount of the civil penalty (only the allocation thereof) and request steps already being taken by PPL and by the Commission to ensure that these remedial measures take effect, there is no reason to upset the Settlement as filed. Further, considering the vast array of customer comments submitted, some of which are not relevant to the consideration of the Settlement before the Commission, it appears that the majority of commenters addressing the substance of the settlement have only minor suggestions that have been previously addressed herein or are in favor of the Settlement as it stands. The Parties agree to the Settlement terms set forth and urge the Commission to approve the Settlement as submitted as being in the public interest.

#### **III.** Standard for Settlements

I&E reiterates herein as stated in I&E's Statement in Support accompanying the Joint Petition for Approval of Settlement that the proposed Settlement Agreement is in the public interest and is consistent with the Commission's Policy Statement at 52 Pa. Code § 69.1201, Factors and standards for evaluating litigated and settled proceedings

involving violations of the Public Utility Code and Commission regulations—statement of policy (Policy Statement). See also, Joseph A. Rosi v. Bell-Atlantic-Pennsylvania, Inc., Docket No. C-00992409 (Order entered March 16, 2000) (Referred to herein as "Rosi factors").

The focus of inquiry for determining whether a proposed settlement should be recommended for approval is not a "burden of proof" standard, as is utilized for contested matters. Pa. PUC, et al. v. City of Lancaster - Bureau of Water, Docket Nos. R-2010-2179103, et al. (Order entered July 14, 2011). Rather, the benchmark for determining the acceptability of the proposed Settlement is whether the proposed terms and conditions are in the public interest. *Id.* (citing Warner v. GTE North, Inc., Docket No. C-00902815 (Order entered April 1, 1996); Pa. PUC v. C.S. Water and Sewer Associates, 74 Pa. P.U.C. 767 (1991)). Pursuant to the Commission's Regulations at 52 Pa. Code § 5.231, it is the Commission's policy to promote settlements. It is understood that the Commission will undertake a review of the proposed settlement to determine whether the terms of said settlement are in the public interest. Pa. PUC v. Philadelphia Gas Works, Docket No. M-00031768 (Order entered January 7, 2004). As here, where a presiding officer has not been assigned to the proceeding, the terms of the proposed Settlement are to be reviewed by the Commission pursuant to 52 Pa. Code § 5.232(g). That review of the Settlement terms and conditions determines whether the Settlement, as filed, meets the benchmark standard of being in the public interest.

To make that determination, and to implement the Commission's policy to promote settlements, the Commission applies the *Rosi* factors. These ten (10) factors are

used to evaluate whether a civil penalty for violating a Commission Order, Regulation, or statute is appropriate, as well as to determine if a proposed settlement is reasonable and approval of a proposed settlement agreement is in the public interest. Once again, the factors to be considered pursuant to 52 Pa. Code § 69.1201(c), are:

- (1) Whether the conduct at issue was of a serious nature. When conduct of a serious nature is involved, such as willful fraud or misrepresentation, the conduct may warrant a higher penalty. When the conduct is less egregious, such as administrative filing or technical errors, it may warrant a lower penalty.
- (2) Whether the resulting consequences of the conduct at issue were of a serious nature. When consequences of a serious nature are involved, such as personal injury or property damage, the consequences may warrant a higher penalty.
- (3) Whether the conduct at issue was deemed intentional or negligent. This factor may only be considered in evaluating litigated cases. When conduct has been deemed intentional, the conduct may result in a higher penalty.
- (4) Whether the regulated entity made efforts to modify internal practices and procedures to address the conduct at issue and prevent similar conduct in the future. These modifications may include activities such as training and improving company techniques and supervision. The amount of time it took the utility to correct the conduct once it was discovered and the involvement of top-level management in correcting the conduct may be considered.
- (5) The number of customers affected and the duration of the violation.
- (6) The compliance history of the regulated entity which committed the violation. An isolated incident from an otherwise compliant utility may result in a lower penalty, whereas frequent, recurrent violations by a utility may result in a higher penalty.
- (7) Whether the regulated entity cooperated with the Commission's investigation. Facts establishing bad faith, active concealment of violations, or attempts to interfere with Commission investigations may result in a higher penalty.

- (8) The amount of the civil penalty or fine necessary to deter future violations. The size of the utility may be considered to determine an appropriate penalty amount.
- (9) Past Commission decisions in similar situations.
- (10) Other relevant factors. 52 Pa. Code § 69.1201(c). The Commission will not apply the factors as strictly in settled cases as in litigated cases. 52 Pa. Code § 69.1201(b).

Pursuant to Section 1201(b), while many of the same factors may still be considered, in settled cases, the parties "will be afforded flexibility in reaching amicable resolutions to complaints and other matters as long as the settlement is in the public interest." *Id*. (Emphasis added.)

Under the terms of the instant Settlement, PPL agreed to revise processes and creation of reports to prevent future "no-bills," update Company practice to prevent inaccurate billing, review and update the formula to calculate estimated billing, create internal daily reports, develop an alternate process for the bypass of actual meter data in order to more quickly respond outside of MDMS and to enhance customer service.

Moreover, this Settlement imposes a punitive civil penalty of One Million Dollars which is in the range of some of the largest deterrent fines ever achieved by I&E.

Clearly, the Settlement reached between I&E and PPL is in the public interest.

WHEREFORE, I&E supports the Settlement Agreement as being in the public interest and respectfully requests that the Commission approve the terms as set forth in the Joint Petition in their entirety without modification.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael L. Swindler Deputy Chief Prosecutor PA Attorney ID No. 43319

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# BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION

Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission, :
Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement's :
Investigation of PPL Electric Utilities :

Corporation for potential violations of 52 :

Pa. Code § 56.1, *et seq.*, of the :

Commission's regulations and 66 Pa.C.S. §

1501 of the Public Utility Code :

# **CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

Docket No. M-2023-3038060

I hereby certify that I have this day, March 19, 2024, served a true copy of the foregoing **Reply Comments**, upon the parties listed below, in accordance with the requirements of 52 Pa. Code § 1.54 (relating to service by a party).

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