



**Testimony of  
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**Before the Senate Consumer Protection and Professional Licensure Committee**

**Storm Outages and Response**

**November 14, 2012**

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Chairs Tomlinson and Boscola and members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the Public Utility Commission's (PUC) role in responding to Hurricane Sandy.

I would like to begin by commending the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) for the outstanding work it did coordinating the response to Hurricane Sandy. Also deserving of recognition is the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC), which was staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by our state agencies to ensure the safety of the Commonwealth's residents during this storm. Needless to say, Pennsylvania is fortunate to have such a capable and dedicated emergency response team headed by PEMA and aided by the SEOC.

I would also like to thank the state's electric utilities for providing a well-coordinated response to such a massive storm. Hurricane Sandy is the largest Atlantic hurricane on record. It affected 24 states, from Florida to Maine and as far west as Michigan and Wisconsin. The storm reached 900 miles wide and at times carried wind speeds of more than 90 mph. At the height of the hurricane, over 8.3 million customers were without power across the country, from North Carolina to New York.

Hurricane Sandy hit Pennsylvania on Monday, October 29, 2012. At the peak of the storm, 1.2 million Pennsylvanians were without power. Throughout the course of the event, over 1.5 million Pennsylvanians lost power at one time or another. The hardest hit territories were UGI, PPL, PECO, MetEd, and Pike County Light and Power.

Despite the magnitude of the storm and the damage it caused, 90 percent of customers in Pennsylvania had their power restored by Saturday, November 3, 2012. Given the number of outages and the extent of the damage, this was an impressive feat. Accomplishing it was the result of a well-coordinated effort by all parties involved, from the leadership of Governor Corbett, to the dedication of emergency groups like PEMA, to the hard work demonstrated by Pennsylvania's electric distribution utilities.

As you may remember, this time last year Pennsylvania was coping with the aftermath of Hurricane Irene, Tropical Storm Lee, and the October snowstorm. Through our experiences with those storms, the PUC and the Commonwealth's utilities learned many valuable lessons which helped make the response to this year's storm a success. In the last year, the PUC has taken several steps to ensure that our storm response efforts continue to improve. In particular, the PUC issued a policy statement on improving communication during widespread outage events, amended our storm response regulations, held meetings with the utilities to discuss and encourage best practices, and issued several reports examining issues like restoration messaging and circuit outage data.

It is evident that these steps made a real difference in the response to Hurricane Sandy. Last year, although Hurricane Irene caused fewer outages and less damage to the electric distribution system, the restoration effort took almost as long as it did for Hurricane Sandy. Approximately 750,000 Pennsylvanians lost power during Hurricane Irene, which is considerably less than the 1.5 million people who lost power during Hurricane Sandy. Moreover, Hurricane Sandy caused almost twice the amount of damage in the PPL, PECO, and MetEd territories with respect to the number of poles,

transformers, cross arms, and miles of wire in need of repair.<sup>1</sup> It is also important to note that the restoration effort for Hurricane Sandy was delayed until the high winds died down on October 30, 2012. Yet, four days after widespread restoration began for Hurricane Sandy, 90 percent of Pennsylvanians had power. By the morning of November 8, 2012, nine days after the start of the restoration effort, one hundred percent of Pennsylvanians had power. These statistics demonstrate that the efforts we have taken to improve our storm response are working.

Last year, the biggest complaint we received was that the utilities failed to communicate well with their customers. During Hurricane Irene people had difficulty getting through to their utilities and, in some instances, the utilities gave inaccurate restoration times. To correct this issue, the PUC issued a policy statement in December 2011 that provided recommendations for improving the timeliness and effectiveness of notice to customers during outages. As a result, the PUC found that during Hurricane Sandy, the communication between the utilities and their customers was much better.

For example, the PUC’s 2011 policy statement encouraged utilities to use social media, email, and text messaging to convey outage information, which proved to be very effective during Hurricane Sandy. Looking at PPL as an example, its Twitter followers increased from 3,500 to 6,500 during Hurricane Sandy. Moreover, PPL’s Twitter feed experienced 531,000 impressions (the number of impressions represents the number of people who saw PPL’s tweets). Similarly, PPL’s Facebook page went

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics from the PPL, PECO, and MetEd territories:

| Poles |       | Miles of Wire |       | Cross Arms |       | Transformers |       |
|-------|-------|---------------|-------|------------|-------|--------------|-------|
| Sandy | Irene | Sandy         | Irene | Sandy      | Irene | Sandy        | Irene |
| 1,642 | 845   | 328           | 164   | 5,851      | 3,079 | 1,268        | 666   |

from having 310 “likes” to having 13,455 “likes.” Even more impressive, PPL had 883,000 impressions for its Facebook page on October 29th and almost 61,000 people posted comments on PPL’s Facebook page throughout the course of the storm. Moreover, PPL’s website experienced 5.1 million page views during the storm, with 1.1 million of those views being from unique visitors.

PPL’s experience during Hurricane Sandy confirmed that reaching out to customers through the internet and social media outlets is very effective way to communicate during outages. Despite being without electricity, people use their smart phones or other means to stay connected during these events. PPL in particular used these outlets to prevent inaccurate or misleading restoration messages by placing updated restoration times on their website and social media sites. PPL was also able to dispel rumors about the restoration effort and interact directly with customers through these outlets.

Taking full advantage of the internet and social media was not the only way utilities improved their communications during Hurricane Sandy. The utilities also stayed in constant contact with the PUC and other public officials throughout the storm. From Sunday, October 28, 2012 to Wednesday, November 7, 2012, the PUC Vice Chairman and I held nightly phone calls with the presidents of Pennsylvania’s electric, natural gas, water, and telephone utilities to keep abreast of outage information and restoration efforts throughout the storm.

I would like to thank the utility executives for their frank and constructive participation in these calls. Touching base on a daily basis not only kept parties informed, but also helped coordinate the restoration effort. Through these calls, utilities

had a forum to share ideas and best practices in real-time, as the storm was unfolding, and the PUC had the opportunity to offer utilities any support they needed to execute their restoration effort. It was through these calls that FirstEnergy was able to secure the help of the National Guard to perform flyovers of the territory to assess the extent of the damage.

It is also worth noting that during the daily conference calls, everyone was very aware of the need to restore power to the polling stations prior to Election Day. I am happy to report that in Pennsylvania, all polling stations either had power or were furnished with generators by Election Day.

The utilities also held daily phone calls with local and state legislators and county emergency management agencies during the storm. In addition, during Hurricane Sandy, more utilities provided company liaisons to affected county emergency management agencies than ever before. Through our experience with last year's storms, we learned this was an effective tool. Several utilities also made changes to their call centers. Last year, it became apparent that utilities needed to improve their ability to handle high-volume call periods during major outage events. To solve this issue, utilities contracted with outside vendors to enhance their call centers in preparing for Hurricane Sandy.

The efforts that the PUC and the utilities made to improve communication made a considerable difference in the success of the storm response. Although Hurricane Sandy was a much bigger storm than last year's Hurricane Irene, customers were more satisfied with the response during this year's event because not only were they better informed, but utilities did a better job of managing expectations. Thanks to enhanced

communication, people were more prepared in advance of the storm, they were better informed during the storm about when to expect their power to be restored, and they were more satisfied with their utilities' efforts after the storm.

I am pleased to report that the Hurricane Sandy response effort was a success in another way. Restoring electricity after a storm like Sandy is a dangerous job, and yet there were no serious injuries amongst all of the line crew that worked to restore power in Pennsylvania. I am sure you will agree that this alone is the definition of success.

In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, the story we have to tell is a positive one, with hundreds of thousands of customers having their power restored within a remarkably short period of time. However, the PUC is keenly aware of the inconvenience, and in some cases danger, people experience when their power goes out. Our agency takes very seriously its duty to ensure safe and reliable electricity service throughout the state and we are always striving to improve our storm response. Along these lines, in the coming months the PUC will continue our examination of the response to Hurricane Sandy and take any steps necessary to ensure the response to the next storm is even better.

Let me conclude by saying the utility line workers and field personnel deserve special recognition for their extraordinary work during the restoration effort. I need not remind anyone here about issues still facing many communities in New York and New Jersey in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. Our thoughts and prayers go out to everyone involved in the restoration efforts in those states. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today. I welcome any questions you may have.