

**BEFORE THE
PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION**

Louise Groce

v.

Philadelphia Gas Works

:
:
:
:
:

F-2015-2477862

INITIAL DECISION

Before
Marta Guhl
Administrative Law Judge

INTRODUCTION

This initial decision grants the Respondent's Motion to Dismiss the Complainant's Complaint for lack of prosecution because the Complainant failed to appear for the scheduled hearing in this matter.

HISTORY OF THE PROCEEDING

On April 7, 2015, Louise Groce (Complainant or Ms. Groce) filed a formal Complaint (Complaint) against Philadelphia Gas Works (PGW or Respondent) alleging that there were incorrect charges on her bill and requesting that these charges be removed from her account.

On May 11, 2015, PGW filed its Answer denying the material allegations of the Complaint.

This Complaint is an appeal of an informal complaint at the Bureau of Consumer Services (BCS) Case No. 3306346 in which the BCS dismissed the complaint and found that the Complainant was responsible for the outstanding balance.

By Call-In Telephonic Hearing Notice dated August 10, 2016, a call in telephonic initial hearing was scheduled for Thursday, September 15, 2016, at 10:00 a.m., and the matter was assigned to me. The Hearing Notice advised the parties of the procedure for the hearing, as well as the date, time and call-in procedure of the scheduled hearing and warned in bold and underlined type: “**At the above date and time, you must call into the hearing. If you fail to do so, your case will be dismissed. You will not be called by the Administrative Law Judge.**”

A Prehearing Order was issued on August 18, 2016. The Prehearing Order directed the parties to comply with various procedural requirements and directed that a request to change the scheduled hearing should be sent to me prior to the hearing date, be in writing and state the agreement or opposition of the other party. It warned both parties of potentially serious consequences if they failed to obtain a continuance and failed to participate in the hearing, including the dismissal of the complaint. It also explained that the Complainant bears the burden of proof to establish that the Respondent violated its tariff, the Public Utility Code, or a Commission Order or regulation, and that she is entitled to the relief requested in the Complaint.

On the date of the hearing, the parties requested a last-minute continuance to try to resolve the matter. I granted the request and the matter was postponed.¹

On December 13, 2017, a Call-In Telephonic Hearing Notice was issued, and the matter was rescheduled for an initial hearing on Wednesday, February 28, 2018, at 10:00 a.m. The Hearing Notice advised the parties of the procedure for the hearing, as well as the date, time and call-in procedure of the scheduled hearing and warned in bold and underlined type: “**At the**

¹ I contacted the parties on several occasions to ascertain the status of the case. On each occasion, the parties requested additional time to work out a settlement. I granted these requests informally. However, as it became clear that the parties were not going to reach a settlement, I scheduled a hearing to address the merits of the Complaint.

above date and time, you must call into the hearing. If you fail to do so, your case will be dismissed. You will not be called by the Administrative Law Judge.”

The hearing convened as scheduled on February 28, 2018. Counsel for PGW was present via telephone with one potential witness and was prepared to proceed. Ms. Groce did not call into the hearing as directed and therefore, was not present and had not contacted this office to indicate that she would or would not participate.

No witnesses were presented, and no exhibits were introduced into the record. Respondent’s counsel moved that the Complaint be dismissed with prejudice for lack of prosecution (Motion) pursuant to 52 Pa.Code § 5.245. In accordance with Commission policy, I am granting the Motion.

The record was closed on March 29, 2018, when I received a copy of the hearing transcript.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Complainant in this case is Louise Groce who resided at 1687 North 56th Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

2. The Respondent in this proceeding is Philadelphia Gas Works.

3. By Call-In Telephonic Hearing Notice dated December 13, 2017, a hearing was scheduled for Wednesday, February 28, 2018, at 10:00 a.m., with both parties given notice.

4. Both parties were advised of the procedures for requesting a continuance of a scheduled hearing by Prehearing Order dated August 18, 2016.

5. The Complainant was advised that the Complaint would be dismissed if she failed to appear for the scheduled hearing by the December 13, 2017, Call-In Telephonic Hearing Notice and the August 18, 2016, Prehearing Order.

6. Respondent appeared for the hearing at the scheduled date and time by legal counsel and a proposed witness and was prepared to proceed.

7. Complainant failed to appear for the scheduled hearing.

8. Complainant did not settle or withdraw the Complaint nor obtain a continuance prior to the scheduled hearing.

DISCUSSION

The Public Utility Code, 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(a), places the burden of proof upon the proponent of a rule or order. As the proponent of a rule or order, Complainant has the burden of proof in this matter pursuant to 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(a).

To establish a sufficient case and satisfy the burden of proof, Complainant must show that the Respondent public utility is responsible or accountable for the problem described in the Complaint. *Patterson v. Bell Telephone Co. of Pa.*, 72 Pa. PUC 196 (1990), *Feinstein v. Philadelphia Suburban Water Co.*, 50 Pa. PUC 300 (1976). Such a showing must be by a preponderance of the evidence. *Samuel J. Lansberry, Inc. v. Pa. Pub. Util. Comm'n*, 578 A.2d 600, 602 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1990), *alloc. den.*, 602 A.2d 863 (Pa. 1992). That is, by presenting evidence more convincing, by even the smallest amount, than that presented by the other party. *Se-Ling Hosiery v. Margulies*, 364 Pa. 45, 70 A.2d 854 (1950). Additionally, any finding of fact necessary to support the Commission's adjudication must be based upon substantial evidence. *Mill v. Pa. Pub. Util. Comm'n*, 447 A.2d 1100 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1982); *Edan Transportation Corp. v. Pa. Pub. Util. Comm'n*, 623 A.2d 6 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1993); 2 Pa.C.S. § 704. More is required than a mere trace of evidence or a suspicion of the existence of a fact sought to be established. *Norfolk and Western Ry. v. Pa. Pub. Util. Comm'n*, 489 Pa. 109, 413 A.2d 1037 (1980); *Erie Resistor Corp. v. Unemployment Compensation Bd. of Review*, 194 Pa. Super. 278, 166 A.2d 96 (1960); *Murphy v. Dep't of Public Welfare*, 480 A.2d 382 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1984).

Administrative agencies, such as the Commission, are required to provide due process to the parties appearing before them. *Schneider v. Pa. Pub. Util. Comm'n*, 479 A.2d 10 (Pa.

Cmwlth. 1984). However, this due process requirement is satisfied when the parties are provided notice and the opportunity to appear and be heard. *Id.*

Notice of the February 28, 2018, hearing in this case was sent to the Complainant on December 13, 2017, by regular first-class mail to the address stated on the Complaint. This piece of mail was never returned to the sender, the scheduling staff for the Office of Administrative Law Judge in Harrisburg. The Prehearing Order was also never returned to the sender. Notice mailed to a party's last known address and not returned by the post office is presumed to have been received. *Meierdierck v. Miller*, 394 Pa. 484, 147 A.2d 406 (1959); *Berkowitz v. Mayflower Securities, Inc.*, 455 Pa. 531, 317 A.2d 584 (1974). Therefore, the Complainant is deemed to have received this document and had sufficient notice of the date, time and call-in procedure of the scheduled hearing.

The Complainant was notified of the scheduled hearing date, time, and call-in procedure for the hearing. Despite this, she made no attempt whatsoever to notify me that she did not plan to call in for the hearing. Under these circumstances, it appears Complainant had ample opportunity to be heard in this proceeding, but voluntarily chose not to do so. Therefore, the due process rights of the Complainant have been fully protected.

By not appearing for the scheduled hearing, the Complainant failed to bear her burden of proof. Consequently, the Complaint must be dismissed.

Under Section 5.245 of the Pennsylvania Code, if the presiding officer finds, after notice and opportunity for hearing, that the actions of a party, in a proceeding obstruct the orderly conduct of the proceeding and are inimical to the public interest, the Commission or the presiding officer may take appropriate action, including dismissal of the complaint, if the action is that of the complainant. 52 Pa.Code § 5.245(c). As the Commission stated in *Mumma v. PPL Electric Utilities Corp.*, Docket No. C-00014869 (Opinion and Order entered January 24, 2002), "It is well-established law that once timely notice of a hearing and the opportunity to be heard have been provided, it is the responsibility of the parties to be present and participate in the hearing." See, *Schneider v. Pa. Pub. Util. Comm'n*, 479 A.2d 10 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1984); *Plummer v. Columbia Gas of Pa., Inc.*, Docket No. Z-00847836 (Opinion and Order entered September 27, 2001). The Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court has made it clear that in administrative hearings, "a party's

own negligence is not sufficient good cause as a matter of law for failing to appear at a . . . hearing.” *Eat’N Park Hospitality Group, Inc. v. Unemployment Compensation Board of Review*, 970 A.2d 492, 494 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2008).

Due to the waste of the Commission’s and Respondent’s time, money, and energy occasioned by the Complainant’s failure to appear at a hearing of which she had notice, this Complaint will be dismissed with prejudice in accordance with well-established Commission precedent. *Jefferson v. UGI Utilities, Inc.*, Docket No. Z-00269892 (Opinion and Order entered December 26, 1995); *Evans v. Bell Atlantic-Pennsylvania, Inc.*, Docket No. C-00957229 (Opinion and Order entered July 12, 1996); *King v. PECO Energy Co*, Docket No. C-00967919 (Opinion and Order entered January 16, 1997); *Kenny v. PPL Electric Utilities Corporation*, Docket No. C-20042399 (Final Order entered October 13, 2004); *Jones v. Peoples Natural Gas Company*, Docket No. C-20054885 (Opinion and Order entered February 14, 2006); *El-Ayazra v. West Penn Power Company*, Docket No. F-2509292 (Opinion and Order entered June 30, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

1. The Commission has jurisdiction over the parties to and subject matter of this proceeding. 66 Pa.C.S. § 701.
2. Pursuant to 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(a), the burden of proof in this proceeding is upon the Complainant.
3. By failing to appear at the scheduled hearing and failing to present any evidence, the Complainant has failed to satisfy the burden of proof.
4. Notice properly mailed to a party’s last known address and not returned is presumed to have been received. *Meierdierck v. Miller*, 394 Pa. 484, 147 A.2d 406 (1959); *Berkowitz v. Mayflower Securities, Inc.*, 455 Pa. 531, 317 A.2d 584 (1974).
5. The Complainant had notice of the date, time and call-in procedure of the scheduled hearing.

6. The due process rights of Complainant have been fully protected in this proceeding. *Schneider v. Pa. Pub. Util. Comm'n*, 479 A.2d 10 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1984).

7. A formal Complaint may be dismissed if, after notice and opportunity to be heard, a Complainant fails to appear and prosecute the Complaint. 52 Pa.Code § 5.245(c). *See also Mumma v. PPL Electric Utilities Corp.*, Docket No. C-00014869 (Opinion and Order entered January 24, 2002).

8. The failure of the Complainant to appear for a scheduled hearing of which she had notice warrants dismissal of the Complaint with prejudice. *Jefferson v. UGI Utilities, Inc.*, Docket No. Z-00269892 (Opinion and Order entered December 26, 1995).

ORDER

THEREFORE,

IT IS ORDERED:

1. That the motion of Philadelphia Gas Works to dismiss the Complaint filed at Docket No. F-2015-2477862 is granted;

2. That the Complaint of Louise Groce against Philadelphia Gas Works at Docket No. F-2015-2477862 is dismissed with prejudice; and

3. That Docket No. F-2015-2477862 be marked closed.

Date: June 1, 2018

/s/
Marta Guhl
Administrative Law Judge