

**BEFORE THE
PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION**

Nia Cornitcher	:	
	:	
v.	:	C-2019-3010510
	:	
PECO Energy Company	:	

INITIAL DECISION

Before
Marta Guhl
Administrative Law Judge

INTRODUCTION

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

HISTORY OF THE PROCEEDING

On June 11, 2019, Nia Cornitcher (Complainant) filed a Complaint against PECO Energy Company (PECO or Respondent) alleging that the utility was threatening to shut off or had shut off her service and requesting a payment arrangement. The Complainant also alleged that there were incorrect charges on her bills.

On June 17, 2019, PECO filed an Answer to the Complaint denying the material allegations.

This Complaint is an appeal of an informal complaint at the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (Commission) Bureau of Consumer Services (BCS).

By Hearing Notice dated June 20, 2019, an initial hearing was scheduled for August 1, 2019, at 9:00 a.m., as part of a call of the docket session, 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 location of the scheduled hearing and warned in bold and underlined type: “**Attention: You must be available in the hearing room when your case is called by the presiding Administrative Law Judge. If you are not present and prepared to go forward with your case when it is called, your case will be dismissed by the Administrative Law Judge.**” The notice was mailed to the Complainant at the address listed on her Complaint. The Hearing Notice was not returned by the U.S. Postal Service as being undeliverable.

A Prehearing Order was issued on June 25, 2019 to the parties and mailed to the Complainant at the address listed on the Complaint. 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. The Prehearing Order was not returned by the U.S. Postal Service as undeliverable.

The hearing convened as scheduled on August 1, 2019. Counsel for PECO was present with one potential witness and was prepared to proceed. The Complainant was also present. However, the Complainant requested a continuance due to a family member’s death and PECO did not oppose the request. I granted the request on the record at the time of the August 1, 2019 hearing.

A Cancellation Notice was issued on August 5, 2019. On August 26, 2019, a new Hearing Notice was issued and rescheduled the matter for an initial hearing on October 15, 2019 at 10:00 a.m. The new Hearing Notice indicated in italicized and underlined text the following: *“Attention: You may lose the case if you do not come to this hearing and present facts on the issues raised.”* The new Hearing Notice was not returned by the U.S. Postal Service as being undeliverable.

The hearing convened as scheduled on October 15, 2019. Counsel for PECO was present with one potential witness and was prepared to proceed. The Complainant was not present and had not contacted this office before the hearing 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. On October 15, 2019, after the hearing, the Complainant sent electronic mail to my legal assistant which indicated that she was still dealing with the death of a family member and was confused about the date of the hearing.

The record was closed on November 4, 2019, when I received a copy of the hearing transcript.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Complainant in this case is Nia Cornitcher who resides at 341 Huntley Road, Upper Darby, Pennsylvania 19082.
2. The Respondent in this proceeding is PECO Energy Company.
3. By Hearing Notice dated June 21, 2019, a hearing was scheduled for August 1, 2019, at 9:00 a.m., with both parties given notice.

4. The Hearing Notice was not returned by the U.S. Postal Service as undeliverable.
5. Both parties were advised of the procedures for requesting a continuance of a scheduled hearing by Prehearing Order dated June 25, 2019.
6. The Prehearing Order was never returned by the U.S. Postal Service.
7. The Complainant appeared for the August 1, 2019, hearing and requested a continuance of the hearing.
8. PECO did not oppose the continuance request.
9. The continuance request was granted at the time of the hearing on August 1, 2019.
10. A new Hearing Notice was issued on August 26, 2019, which indicated a new hearing date of October 15, 2019, at 10:00 a.m.
11. The August 26, 2019 Hearing Notice was never returned by the U.S. Postal Service.
12. The Complainant was advised that the Complaint would be dismissed if she failed to appear for the scheduled hearing by the June 21, 2019 Hearing Notice, the June 25, 2019 Prehearing Order, and the August 26, 2019, Hearing Notice.
13. The Respondent appeared for the October 15, 2019, hearing at the scheduled date and time by legal counsel and a potential witness and was prepared to proceed.
14. The Complainant failed to appear for the October 15, 2019, scheduled hearing.

15. The Complainant did not settle or withdraw the Complaint nor obtain a continuance prior to the October 15, 2019, 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.*

The Hearing Notice for the October 15, 2019 hearing in this case was sent to the Complainant on August 26, 2019, by regular first-class mail to the address stated on the Complaint. The Notice was not returned to the Harrisburg Office of Administrative Law Judge by the U.S. Postal Service. 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 location, date and time of the scheduled hearing.

The Complainant was notified of the scheduled hearing date, time, and location for the hearing. Despite this, she made no attempt prior to the hearing to notify me that she did not plan to appear 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. The Complainant also appeared for a prior hearing on August 1, 2019 and was granted a continuance at that time due to a death in her family. The Complainant was aware of how to request a continuance and did not do so before the hearing on October 15, 2019 or appear for the hearing. The Complainant had adequate time before the hearing to contact my office if she was confused about the hearing date and time. The Complainant only contacted my office on the hearing date, after the hearing had already taken place. 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 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, location and time 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 PECO Energy Company to dismiss the Complaint filed at Docket No. C-2019-3010510 is granted;

2. That the Complaint of Nia Cornitcher against PECO Energy Company at Docket No. C-2019-3010510 is dismissed with prejudice; and

3. That Docket No. C-2019-3010510 be marked closed.

Date: January 9, 2020

/s/
Marta Guhl
Administrative Law Judge