

**BEFORE THE  
PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION**

Dennis Shepler	:	
	:	
v.	:	F-2024-3049561
	:	
PPL Electric Utilities Corporation	:	

**INITIAL DECISION**

Before  
Steven K. Haas  
Administrative Law Judge

**INTRODUCTION**

This decision dismisses the Formal Complaint due to the failure of the Complainant to appear for the hearing and prosecute the complaint.

**HISTORY OF THE PROCEEDING**

On May 24, 2024, Dennis Shepler (Complainant or Mr. Shepler) filed a Formal Complaint (complaint) with the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (Commission) against PPL Electric Utilities Corporation (Respondent or PPL). In his complaint, Mr. Shepler is requesting a more affordable payment arrangement for the payment of outstanding charges on his PPL account. Mr. Shepler’s complaint is a timely

appeal of a decision of the Commission’s Bureau of Consumer Services to his informal complaint at BCS Case No. 3973034.<sup>1</sup>

On his complaint form, Complainant selected the option to receive all communications from the Commission via First-Class Mail at the address provided by him on the complaint. Complaint ¶ 9.

On July 8, 2024, the Respondent filed an answer in which it reviewed the terms of the BCS decision on Mr. Shepler’s informal complaint and averred that he had defaulted on several PPL-issued payment arrangements. Respondent requested that the complaint be denied in its entirety.

On July 26, 2024, an Initial Call-In Telephone Hearing Notice was served on the parties scheduling an initial telephonic hearing on September 18, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. and the case was assigned to me. The Hearing Notice provided the parties with the Toll-Free Bridge Number and the PIN to call to participate in the telephonic hearing. The Hearing Notice further stated as follows:

**FAILURE TO APPEAR:** You may lose the case if you do not take part in this hearing and present evidence on the issue(s) raised. Your case may be dismissed “with prejudice” which means that you will be barred from filing another complaint raising the same claim(s) and issue(s) presented in the dismissed complaint.

**CONTINUANCES.** You may request a continuance of the hearing if you have a good reason. All continuances will be granted only for good cause. To request a continuance, you must submit a written request (a “motion”) at least five (5) days before the hearing. Your motion should include: 1) The case name, number, and hearing date; 2) The reason

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<sup>1</sup> A timely BCS appeal is subject to de novo review. 52 Pa. Code § 56.173(a).

for the request; and 3) Whether the other party agrees (or if you do not know).

On July 29, 2024, a Prehearing Order was served on the parties which reminded the parties of the date and time of the hearing. The Prehearing Order again stated the failure to appear warning. Additionally, the Prehearing Order informed the parties about the applicable procedural rules, and again included the procedure to follow for requesting a hearing continuance.

In the ordinary course of the Commission's business, the Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order were served via U.S. First-Class Mail to Complainant at the street address provided by him to the Commission. The Commission did not receive any return mail indicating that the Hearing Notice or the Prehearing Order sent to Complainant's address were undeliverable.

On September 18, 2024, the hearing convened as scheduled. Megan Rulli, Esquire, appeared on behalf of Respondent along with one witness and was ready to proceed. The court reporter was also present. Complainant was not present to start the hearing. After a short recess to allow time for Complainant to appear, the hearing proceeded in Complainant's absence. No testimony was taken, and no exhibits were introduced into the record. At the hearing, Respondent moved to dismiss the complaint with prejudice due to Complainant's failure to appear and prosecute his complaint. I took this motion under advisement.

Complainant has not contacted the Commission to explain why his failure to appear at the hearing was unavoidable.

The record closed on September 20, 2024. This decision grants the Respondent's motion to dismiss the complaint with prejudice.

## FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Complainant is Dennis Shepler.
2. The Respondent is PPL Electric Utilities Corporation.
3. On May 24, 2024, Complainant filed a Formal Complaint against Respondent.
4. On July 8, 2024, Respondent filed an answer to the complaint.
5. Complainant selected the option to receive all communications from the Commission via First-Class Mail at the address provided by him on the Complaint form. Complaint ¶ 9.
6. On July 26, 2024, a Call-In Telephone Hearing Notice was served on Complainant scheduling an initial telephonic hearing on September 18, 2024, at 10:00 a.m.
7. On July 29, 2024, a Prehearing Order for Telephone Hearing was served on Complainant providing additional information to the parties regarding the hearing.
8. Both the Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order were served on Complainant by U.S. First-Class Mail to the address provided by him to the Commission.
9. Both the Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order provided the Complainant with the toll-free bridge telephone number and PIN to call and participate in

the hearing, and, *inter alia*, the procedure for requesting a continuance and the possible consequences of failing to appear at the hearing.

10. Neither the Hearing Notice nor the Prehearing Order were returned to the Commission as undeliverable.

11. Complainant failed to appear and participate in the scheduled telephonic hearing on September 18, 2024.

12. The court reporter, Counsel for Respondent and its witness were present and prepared to proceed at the September 18, 2024, hearing.

13. Complainant has not contacted the Commission to explain why his failure to appear at the hearing was unavoidable.

## DISCUSSION

### Due Process and Notice

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). This due process requirement is satisfied when the parties are provided notice and the opportunity to be heard. *Id.*

The record shows that Complainant was provided notice and the opportunity to be heard. First, on July 26, 2024, Complainant was served a Hearing Notice which advised the parties of the date and time of the hearing, and how to participate. Second, on July 29, 2024, Complainant was served a Prehearing Order which reminded the parties of the date and time of the hearing, and how to participate. Further,

both documents advised the parties, *inter alia*, how to request a continuance prior to the hearing if needed. Finally, both documents advised Complainant that failure to appear may result in dismissal with prejudice, explaining that Complainant would be barred from filing another complaint raising the same claim(s) and issues(s) presented in the dismissed complaint.

Both the Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order were served by U.S. First-Class Mail to the address provided on the complaint. Neither document was returned as being undeliverable. Accordingly, it must be presumed that this mail was received by Complainant. *Berkowitz v. Mayflower Sec., Inc.*, 317 A.2d 584 (Pa. 1974); *Meierdierck v. Miller*, 147 A.2d 406 (Pa. 1959); *Samaras v. Hartwick*, 698 A.2d 71 (Pa. Super. 1997); *Judge v. Celina Mut. Ins. Co.*, 449 A.2d 658 (Pa. Super. 1982).

### **Failure to Appear, Waiver and the “Unavoidable” Standard**

Once a hearing is scheduled and the parties are duly notified by the Commission, it is the responsibility of the parties to appear and participate in the hearing. *Mumma v. PPL Elec. Utils. Corp.*, Docket No. C-00014869 (Opinion and Order entered Jan. 28, 2002). Both the Public Utility Code and the Commission’s regulations provide that, after being notified, a party who fails to appear at a scheduled hearing shall be deemed to have waived the opportunity to participate in the hearing and shall not be permitted to later reopen the matter or be permitted to recall excused witnesses. 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(f); 52 Pa. Code § 5.245(a). However, these provisions in the Code and in the Commission’s regulations may not apply if the presiding officer determines that the party’s failure to appear at the hearing was unavoidable and that the interests of the other parties and of the public would not be prejudiced by permitting the reopening of the record or further examination. 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(f); 52 Pa. Code § 5.245(b).

The party who failed to appear at the hearing has the burden of explaining why his/her failure to appear was unavoidable. 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(a); *Herr v. West Penn Power Co.*, Docket No. C-2021-3028202 (Opinion and Order entered Sept. 15, 2022). When there are no facts in the record that the party's failure to appear was unavoidable, the complaint should be dismissed with prejudice. *Brown v. PECO Energy Co.*, Docket No. C-2019-3009486 (Opinion and Order entered Apr. 22, 2022) (*Brown*); *Little v. Pittsburgh Water & Sewer Auth.*, Docket No. F-2021-3027107 (Opinion and Order entered Feb. 7, 2022) (*Little*); *Williams v. PECO Energy Co.*, Docket No. C-2018-3000734 (Opinion and Order entered Mar. 14, 2019) (*Williams*); *Jefferson v. UGI Utils., Inc.*, Docket No. Z-00269892 (Opinion and Order entered Dec. 26, 1995) (*Jefferson*); 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(f); 52 Pa. Code § 5.245(a).

Here, Complainant failed to appear for the hearing despite receiving notice and despite the undersigned allowing additional time for Complainant to appear. To date, there has been no communication to the Office of Administrative Law Judge or me by, or on behalf of, Complainant explaining why Complainant's failure to appear at the hearing was unavoidable.

Consequently, I find that Complainant waived the opportunity to participate in a hearing on the matters raised in the complaint, Complainant's absence was not unavoidable, and the complaint should be dismissed with prejudice.

### **Burden of Proof and Dismissal of Complaint**

Section 332(a) of the Public Utility Code provides that the party seeking relief from the Commission has the burden of proof. 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(a). To establish a sufficient case and satisfy the burden of proof, the complainant must show that the respondent public utility is responsible or accountable for the problem described in the complaint. *Patterson v. Bell Tel. Co. of Pa.*, 72 Pa.P.U.C. 196 (1990); *Feinstein v. Phila.*

*Suburban Water Co.*, 50 Pa.P.U.C. 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 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1990). A preponderance of the evidence is established by presenting evidence more convincing, by even the smallest amount, than that presented by the other party. *Se-Ling Hosiery v. Margulies*, 70 A.2d 854 (Pa. 1950).

As the proponent of any request for relief, Complainant bears the burden of proof. By failing to participate and present any evidence to support the complaint, Complainant has failed to meet this burden. Thus, it is appropriate to dismiss the complaint with prejudice. *Brown; Williams*(citing *Jefferson*). Accordingly, the merits of the complaint will not be addressed.

Respondent's motion to dismiss with prejudice will be granted.

#### CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

1. The Commission has jurisdiction over the subject matter of and the parties to this proceeding. 66 Pa.C.S. § 701.
2. The Commission is required to provide due process to the parties appearing before them; this due process requirement is satisfied when the parties are provided notice and the opportunity to be heard. *Schneider v. Pa. Pub. Util. Comm'n*, 479 A.2d 10 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1984).
3. Notice mailed via U.S. First-Class Mail to a party and not returned to the Commission as undeliverable is presumed received. *Berkowitz v. Mayflower Sec., Inc.*, 317 A.2d 584 (Pa. 1974); *Meierdierck v. Miller*, 147 A.2d 406 (Pa. 1959); *Samaras v. Hartwick*, 698 A.2d 71 (Pa. Super. 1997); *Judge v. Celina Mut. Ins. Co.*, 449 A.2d 658 (Pa. Super. 1982).

4. After being notified, a party who fails to appear at a scheduled hearing shall be deemed to have waived the opportunity to participate in the hearing and shall not be permitted to later reopen the matter or be permitted to recall excused witnesses. 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(f); 52 Pa. Code § 5.245(a).

5. If there are no facts in the record that a party's failure to appear at a hearing was unavoidable, the complaint should be dismissed with prejudice. *Brown v. PECO Energy Co.*, Docket No. C-2019-3009486 (Opinion and Order entered Apr. 22, 2022); *Little v. Pittsburgh Water & Sewer Auth.*, Docket No. F-2021-3027107 (Opinion and Order entered Feb. 7, 2022); *Williams v. PECO Energy Co.*, Docket No. C-2018-3000734 (Opinion and Order entered Mar. 14, 2019); *Jefferson v. UGI Utils., Inc.*, Docket No. Z-00269892 (Opinion and Order entered Dec. 26, 1995).

6. Complainant's due process rights have been fully protected and Complainant's failure to appear was not unavoidable. *Schneider v. Pa. Pub. Util. Comm'n*, 479 A.2d 10 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1984); 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(f); 52 Pa. Code § 5.245(a).

7. As the party seeking relief, Complainant bears the burden of proof by a preponderance of the evidence. 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(a); *Se-Ling Hosiery v. Margulies*, 70 A.2d 854 (Pa. 1950).

8. By failing to participate in the hearing and proffer any evidence to support the complaint, Complainant has failed to meet the burden of proof. 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(a).

