

**BEFORE THE
PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION**

Gerald Stokes

v.

Philadelphia Gas Works

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C-2024-3050020

INITIAL DECISION

Before
Marta Guhl
Administrative Law Judge

INTRODUCTION

This Decision dismisses the Formal Complaint of Gerald Stokes for his failure to appear for the hearing and prosecute the Complaint.

HISTORY OF THE PROCEEDING

On June 17, 2024, Gerald Stokes (Complainant or Mr. Stokes) filed a Formal Complaint (Complaint) with the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (Commission) against Philadelphia Gas Works (Respondent or PGW) indicating that there were issues with his bills and that he was having issues with the reliability, safety, and quality of his utility service.

On August 1, 2024,¹ the Respondent filed an Answer in which it denied the material allegations of fact and conclusions of law in the Complaint. The Respondent requested that the Complaint be dismissed.

By Initial Call-In Telephonic Hearing Notice dated August 15, 2024, a telephonic hearing was scheduled for October 31, 2024, and the matter was assigned to me. The Hearing Notice provided the parties with the Toll-Free Bridge Number and the PIN to call and 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 for the request; and 3) Whether the other party agrees (or if you do not know).

On September 3, 2024, a Prehearing Order was served on the parties which reminded them of the date and time of the hearing. The Prehearing Order warned against possible dismissal for failure to appear. Additionally, the Prehearing Order informed the parties about the applicable procedural rules and again included the procedure to follow for hearing continuances.

¹ The Secretary’s Bureau served the Complaint on the Respondent on July 11, 2024.

The Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order were served on the Complainant via First-Class Mail at the Complainant's request and in the ordinary course of the Commission's business to the address provided by the Complainant. Neither the Hearing Notice nor the Prehearing Order were returned to the Commission as undeliverable.

On October 31, 2024, the hearing convened as scheduled. Anita Murray, Esquire, appeared on behalf of PGW and was ready to proceed. The Complainant was not present to start the hearing. After a short recess to allow time for the Complainant to appear, the hearing proceeded in the Complainant's absence. No testimony was taken, and no exhibits were introduced into the record. At the hearing, the Respondent moved to dismiss the Complaint for the Complainant's failure to appear and prosecute. I took this motion under advisement.

The record closed on November 29, 2024, upon my receipt of the transcript.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Complainant is Gerald Stokes.
2. The Respondent is Philadelphia Gas Works.
3. On June 17, 2024, the Complainant filed a Formal Complaint against the Respondent.
4. On August 1, 2024, the Respondent filed an Answer to the Complaint.

5. On August 15, 2024, a Call-In Telephone Hearing Notice was issued scheduling an initial telephonic hearing on October 31, 2024, at 10:00 a.m.

6. On September 3, 2024, a Prehearing Order was issued providing additional information to the parties regarding the hearing.

7. The Complainant selected service of all documents from the Commission, including all hearing notices, orders and related documents, by First-Class Mail. Complaint ¶ 9.

8. The Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order were served via First-Class Mail to the Complainant at the Complainant's request and in the ordinary course of the Commission's business to the address provided by the Complainant.

9. Both the Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order provided the parties 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. The Complainant failed to appear and participate in the scheduled telephonic hearing on October 31, 2024. Tr. 5.

12. Counsel for the Respondent was present and prepared to proceed at the October 31, 2024, hearing. Tr. 5.

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

DISCUSSION

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 the Complainant was provided notice and the opportunity to be heard. On August 15, 2024, the Complainant was served a Hearing Notice which advised the parties of the date and time of the hearing, and how to participate. On September 3, 2024, a Prehearing Order was issued providing additional information to the parties regarding the hearing. Both the Hearing Notice and the Prehearing Order advised the Complainant that the case could be dismissed if the Complainant did not call in and participate in the hearing.

The Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order were served via First-Class Mail on the Complainant at the address that the Complainant provided to the Commission. None were returned as undeliverable. Accordingly, I must presume that these documents, which were sent in the ordinary course of business, were received by the 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).

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 do 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 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. *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); 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(f); 52 Pa. Code § 5.245(a).

The Complainant failed to appear for the hearing despite receiving notice and despite the undersigned allowing additional time for the Complainant to appear. To date, there has been no communication with the Office of Administrative Law Judge or me by, or on behalf of, the Complainant explaining why the Complainant's failure to appear at the hearing was unavoidable. Consequently, I find the Complainant waived the opportunity to participate in a hearing on the matters raised in the Complaint, the Complainant's absence was not unavoidable, and the Complaint should be dismissed.

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's 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, the Complainant bears the burden of proof. By failing to participate and proffer any evidence to support the Complaint, the Complainant has failed to meet this burden. Thus, it is appropriate to dismiss the Complaint. *Brown v. PECO Energy Co.*, Docket No. C-2019-3009486 (Opinion and Order entered Apr. 22, 2022); *Williams v. PECO Energy Co.*, Docket No. C-2018-300734 (Opinion and Order entered Mar. 14, 2019) (citing *Jefferson v. UGI Utils., Inc.*, Docket No. Z-00269892 (Opinion and Order entered Dec. 26, 1995)).

Accordingly, the Respondent's motion to dismiss 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. The Complainant received notice of the hearing. *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. *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. The Complainant's due process rights have been fully protected and the 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, the 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, the Complainant has failed to meet the burden of proof. 66 Pa.C.S. § 332(a).

ORDER

THEREFORE,

IT IS ORDERED:

1. That Philadelphia Gas Works' motion to dismiss the Formal Complaint of Gerald Stokes at Docket Number C-2024-3050020 is granted.
2. That the Formal Complaint filed by Gerald Stokes in *Gerald Stokes v. Philadelphia Gas Works*, Docket Number C-2024-3050020, is hereby dismissed.
3. That Docket No. C-2024-3050020 be marked closed.

Date: February 26, 2025

_____/s/
Marta Guhl
Administrative Law Judge