

**BEFORE THE
PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION**

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|----------------|
| Heather Nitch | : | |
| | : | |
| v. | : | C-2025-3053135 |
| | : | |
| Pennsylvania-American Water Company | : | |

INITIAL DECISION

Before
Katrina L. Dunderdale
Administrative Law Judge

INTRODUCTION

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

HISTORY OF THE PROCEEDING

On January 29, 2025, Heather Nitch (Complainant) filed a Formal Complaint (Complaint) with the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (Commission) against Pennsylvania-American Water Company (Respondent or PAWC). The Complaint alleges that PAWC was threatening to shut off service or had already shut off water service at the service address, and Complainant would like a payment agreement.

In her Complaint, Complainant selected the option to receive all communications from the Commission via eService through an eFiling account she registered with the Commission. Complaint ¶ 9.

On February 18, 2025, Respondent filed the Answer in which it generally denied the material allegations of fact and conclusions of law in the Complaint. Respondent averred Complainant received a payment arrangement from the Commission's Bureau of Consumer Services (BCS) which was appropriate given Complainant's income, amount of arrearage and household size.¹ Respondent requested the Commission dismiss the Complaint.

On June 6, 2025, the Office of Administrative Law Judge (OALJ) served a Call-In Telephone Hearing Notice on the parties scheduling an initial telephonic hearing on August 5, 2025 and the case 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).

¹ On April 22, 2024, BCS granted a Level 2 payment arrangement to Complainant in BCS Case No. 3978086.

On June 6, 2025, the presiding officer served a Prehearing Order 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 hearing continuances.

The Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order were eServed to Complainant in the ordinary course of the Commission's business to the email address that was registered with the Commission by Complainant. Neither the Hearing Notice nor the Prehearing Order were returned to the Commission as undeliverable.

On August 5, 2025, I convened the hearing as scheduled. Nicholas Stobbe, 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 at the start of the hearing and the hearing proceeded in Complainant's absence, after taking a recess until 10:15 a.m. Respondent noted numerous attempts were made to communicate with Complainant prior to the hearing using the email address provided by Complainant, telephone calls and the United States Postal Service. No testimony was taken, and no exhibits were introduced into the record. Respondent moved to dismiss the Complaint for Complainant's failure to appear and prosecute her Complaint. Tr. 8, 9. I took this motion under advisement. Tr. 9.

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

The record closed on August 5, 2025, at the conclusion of the hearing, pursuant to 52 Pa. Code § 5.431(a).² This decision grants Respondent's motion to dismiss the Complaint.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. Complainant is Heather Nitch.
2. Respondent is Pennsylvania-American Water Company.
3. On January 29, 2025, Complainant filed a Formal Complaint against Respondent.
4. On February 18, 2025, Respondent filed the Answer to the Complaint.
5. On June 6, 2025, OALJ served a Call-In Telephone Hearing Notice on Complainant scheduling an initial telephonic hearing on August 5, 2025 at 10:00 a.m.
6. On June 6, 2025, I served a Prehearing Order for Telephone Hearing on Complainant providing additional information to the parties regarding the hearing.
7. The Commission served both the Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order on Complainant by eService to the email address Complainant provided to and registered with the Commission.

² The provision at 52 Pa. Code § 5.431(a) states that the hearing “record will be closed at the conclusion of the hearing unless otherwise directed by the presiding officer or the Commission.”

8. Both the Hearing Notice and Prehearing Order provided 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.

9. Neither the Hearing Notice nor the Prehearing Order was returned to the Commission as undeliverable.

10. Complainant failed to appear and participate in the scheduled telephonic hearing on August 5, 2025.

11. The court reporter, Counsel for Respondent and its witness were present and prepared to proceed at the August 5, 2025 hearing.

12. Complainant has not contacted the Commission to explain why her 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 June 6, 2025, Complainant was served a Hearing Notice which advised the parties of the date and time of the hearing, and how to

participate. Second, on June 6, 2025, 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, which means 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 eServed to Complainant at the email address she registered with the Commission. Neither was returned to the Commission as undeliverable. Notice eServed to a party's registered email address with no notification that service failed is presumed to have been received. *Hu v. PECO Energy Co.*, Docket No. C-2019-3012075 (Order entered Dec. 19, 2019); *Zirkel v. Phila. Gas Works*, Docket No. C-2016-2561176 (Final Order entered Apr. 7, 2017); *Morella v. PECO Energy Co.*, Docket No. C-2016-2553416 (Final Order entered Jan. 31, 2017).

Complainant had notice of the hearing and an opportunity to be heard in this proceeding. Therefore, Complainant's due process rights have been fully protected. *Sentner v. Bell Tel. Co. of Pa.*, Docket No. F-00161106 (Opinion and Order entered Oct. 25, 1993).

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 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).

A 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 a party's failure to appear was unavoidable, a 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).

Complainant failed to appear for the hearing despite receiving notice and despite the undersigned allowing additional time at the hearing for Complainant to appear. To date, there has been no communication to OALJ 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.

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, a complainant must show that a respondent public utility is responsible or accountable for the problem described in a 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 proffer any evidence to support the Complaint, 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 merits of the Complaint will not be addressed.

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. Notice eServed to a party's registered email address with no notification that service failed to be delivered to that email address is presumed to have been received. *Hu v. PECO Energy Co.*, Docket No. C-2019-3012075 (Order entered Dec. 19, 2019); *Zirkel v. Phila. Gas Works*, Docket No. C-2016-2561176 (Final Order entered Apr. 7, 2017); *Morella v. PECO Energy Co.*, Docket No. C-2016-2553416 (Final Order entered Jan. 31, 2017).

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, a 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. 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).

ORDER

THEREFORE,

IT IS ORDERED:

1. That Pennsylvania-American Water Company's motion to dismiss the Formal Complaint of Heather Nitch at Docket No. C-2025-3053135 is granted.

2. That the Formal Complaint filed by Heather Nitch in Heather Nitch v. Pennsylvania-American Water Company, Docket No. C-2025-3053135, is hereby dismissed.

3. That the Secretary's Bureau shall mark Docket No. C-2025-3053135 as closed.

Date: August 15, 2025

/s/
Katrina L. Dunderdale
Administrative Law Judge