

Feb. 10, 2020

Testimony for DPU Hearing re: Columbia Gas Disaster, Merrimack Valley

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54 Bradstreet Road, North Andover (part of impacted area)

I submit this testimony as an impacted homeowner, a member of the Interfaith Clergy Team that responded to the crisis, and as one of the Chaplains for the North Andover Fire Department. I would urge the DPU to assess the highest fines possible on Columbia Gas, as their crisis response and communication was utterly inadequate.

- I. The impact on work and family for thousands cannot be overestimated.

Personally, my life was significantly impacted, but compared to others, I got off easy. I had no heat or hot water from the time of the disaster until the Sunday before Thanksgiving. I was able to pay \$15,000 plus up front for private contractors to do asbestos removal and bring in a new furnace; had I not been, I would have been out of my home likely for many more months.

In addition to a financial advantage, I was able to rush home from work many, many times to meet Columbia Gas reps and others, as my job is just 5 minutes from my home and granted me that flexibility. Others would have to take time off from work, and then be extremely frustrated when no one showed up or appointments were changed.

Even congregations- five impacted in Andover, one in North Andover, and many in Lawrence, did not get good service from CG. When churches paid for services up front, in several cases they had to wait and wait and wait for reimbursement from the company. I know of at least one colleague who had to threaten to go to the media in order for CG to pay attention and deliver a check, I believe about 3 months after it was first expected.

II. The impact on the local Fire Departments continues to this day.

The explosions put not only many adults and children at risk of death and serious injury, they also endangered our firefighters and police. They were at risk as they battled many simultaneous fires with inadequate resources, and breathed in the smoke of those fires. I continue to be grateful to this day that no firefighters' lives were lost. We may not be so lucky the next time. Even still today, they are *constantly* being called out to check on gas smells/ gas leaks. They are busier and residents are more nervous than ever.

CG had no accurate maps of their system to share with emergency responders. When a second crisis occurred in Lawrence in the middle of the night just over a full year later, and police had to go door to door, pounding on them in the middle of the night to get people up out of bed, CG *STILL* had no accurate maps.

It was clear to the public that the company seemed to first cut corners on safety, and had no decent emergency plan. (At the very least, the DPU should require maps shared with first responders and emergency plans that are actively reviewed every two years.)

III. The impact on the most vulnerable people in our communities was devastating.

Widows, elders, infants, children, people with disabilities, people with recent trauma, people with mental health issues, people living paycheck to paycheck were in many cases thrown into crisis. People lost jobs, homes, their mental stability, their basic sense of safety. Funds collected by the interfaith group had to supply diapers to elders who could not afford them in the wake of the disaster. Anxiety increased dramatically among children, some of whom no longer wanted to go to school or sleep alone. Adults were afraid to tell their parents about the second gas leak event in 2019 out of fear that such news could trigger heart attacks.

The Interfaith Team held several community meetings and learned that in the immediate aftermath of the event, there were not enough translators on the streets, that local people trained to do translation were never utilized, that calls to get hotel rooms went unanswered for weeks, that people needed more therapeutic support. We conveyed this to the CG CEO at the time, but did not see results from that.

On the question of timely information to the public: The Interfaith clergy had a meeting with the former CEO of CG, and at that meeting he told us that he didn't think the deadline for re-light would be met. And yet, it was 10 more days before that information was shared with the public. In the meantime, people had been making decisions based on false information—whether or not to get on the list for hotel rooms, whether or not to add other heating sources to their homes, such as wood or pellet stoves. After hearing from the CEO, I decided I had better install another heating source to keep my pipes from freezing, and yet was told by my adjuster that I couldn't do such a thing because I was "too close to my re-light date." It did not matter that I explained that I'd been in a meeting with the CEO who had said he believed that re-light date would not be met. It didn't matter to the adjuster. This is just one small example of the kind of run-around that people experienced. CG also went back and forth about covering high efficiency equipment, heat pumps, upgrading electric panels to accommodate space heaters, etc. despite *explicit appeals* for energy efficiency.

I understand that there is \$9 billion worth of repair work to be done on gas piping in the Commonwealth- to put in new gas pipes that will be obsolete by 2050. That number represents a tremendous amount of work with pipes underground... and a tremendous chance of more life-endangering gas leaks. Given the degree of negligence, lack of planning, lack of oversight, the compensation of executives, etc., I believe DPU should use its authority to fine CG \$100 million. Residents would then ask the legislature to set most of that money aside in order to transition the city of Lawrence and the two towns to renewable energy— community thermal (replacing gas pipes with hot water pipes) and solar. This would be the silver lining of this impactful disaster.