

TESTIMONY FOR THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE AND ASSEMBLY JOINT PUBLIC HEARING TO ADDRESS THE EMERGENCY STORM RESPONSE AND CUSTOMER COMMUNICATION BY UTILITIES LOCATED IN NEW YORK CITY, LONG ISLAND, WESTCHESTER COUNTY, AND THE GREATER HUDSON VALLEY POST TROPICAL STORM ISAIAS

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I would like to thank the New York State Senate and Assembly Committees for the opportunity to provide this testimony on behalf of the Town of New Castle.

Tropical Storm Isaias was one of the most destructive storms in recent memory and the Town of New Castle experienced staggering, widespread, and prolonged outages.

In the immediate aftermath of the storm on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 4,022 New Castle households were without power, out of 6,800 total households (59%). While this made us as one of the hardest hit communities, we were certainly not alone.

What made us unique, was the duration – the prolonged nature – of the outages in New Castle. The estimated time of restoration for Westchester County was 11PM on Sunday, August 9<sup>th</sup>. At that time, 2,331 households in New Castle were still without power. At a time when Con Edison predicted that 95% of customers with outages would be restored, 58% of residents in New Castle who lost power during the storm were still sitting in their dark, sweltering homes.

What went wrong here, and why did it go so terribly wrong for New Castle, in particular?

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I want to share another way in which New Castle residents were uniquely harmed in the aftermath of the storm.

On Friday, August 7<sup>th</sup> at 2PM 3,267 New Castle residents – everyone in town who was without power -- received an erroneous text message claiming that power would be restored by 11PM that same

night. In reality, only 400 residents should have received the message. At the time we still didn't have a single restoration crew in town. Despite quick action by the Town and our State and County elected officials to notify Con Edison of its error, the utility was unable (or unwilling?) to correct the ETRs. Con Edison was also unable to text an apology because it was not one of the canned messages allowed by their texting technology. Only *after* the Friday ETR was missed, did Con Edison email an apology to 2,700+ residents informing them that their new ETR was Monday at 11PM. As Con Edison customers, we have grown accustomed to false hope and dashed expectations; but this egregious, insulting error was simply too much for residents to bear.

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At every stage from storm preparation to response, the decisions that Con Edison made were driven by profit motives – the desire to maximize returns for shareholders – not by any sense of duty of responsibility to protect the health and safety of its customers.

We see this when we observe the number of dangerous trees lining our streets draped over wires. There are a shocking number of limbs still dangling from power lines today.

We see this profit-driven approach reflected in the fact that Con Edison ignored storm forecasts that would have required them to mobilize crews sooner. I was always taught to “hope for the best and prepare for the worst.” Con Edison prepared only for the best-case scenario.

And Con Edison's profit-motive mentality is most clearly reflected in their approach to customer relations and communications, which is to say that they have pushed off responsibility to under-resourced municipalities like New Castle – they have effectively outsourced customer relations to local governments.

If my condemnation of the profit-seeking motivations of Con Edison seems harsh, let me say this: there is no way for me to adequately express the level of rage in my community. There is no way to describe the invective I heard, as your outsourced customer relations representative. I earned the right to my incredulity and outrage.

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If Con Edison is to retain its license to operate, I beseech this committee to urge the Public Service Corporation to demand substantive changes.

We need substantial investments in storm hardening – tree trimming, pole replacement, and upgrades to wires and transmitters.

We need technology improvements – equip your trucks with GPS and provide that information on the municipal dashboards, so we actually know where crews are working in our communities.

We need you to perform a cost-benefit analysis on burying wires; release this information to the public; and make a truly substantial investment in infrastructure improvement.

Fines and fees are a mere slap on the wrist, and we have seen that they do little to compel the kind of radical change that we are demanding.

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Lastly, before I close, I devoted the majority of this testimony to Con Edison's performance because this was where the pain was felt mostly deeply in my community, and also where we were uniquely negatively impacted among communities. That said, I want to say a quick word about Altice and Verizon: simply sitting back and placing blame at the feet of Con Edison is not a satisfactory restoration game plan. You must begin surveying storm damage sooner; you must coordinate with Con Edison; you must provide municipalities with outage numbers; you must provide customers with outage

maps and ETRs. Your flat-footed performance – particularly during a pandemic when many people are working from home – much like Con Edison’s requires substantive improvements.

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Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of my municipality. I applaud the quick action on the part of the Senate and Assembly, and I offer up my assistance, and that of the Town of New Castle, if we can provide further information or help going forward.