

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 28, 2018

Mr. Steve Bryant
President
Columbia Gas of Massachusetts
P.O. Box 2025
Springfield, MA 01102

Dear Mr. Bryant:

We are writing regarding your recently launched effort to provide space heaters and electric hot plates to the thousands of people affected by the recent gas explosions in Andover, Lawrence and North Andover. Fire safety experts have warned that these appliances “can be a danger”, and have cautioned residents to take specific safety measures.¹ And already, an electric hot plate provided by Columbia Gas has reportedly caught fire.² It is critical that residents without natural gas are able to cook and to heat their homes as they await full restoration of service.

We understand you worked with town leadership, state officials—including MEMA and other public safety officials—and other experts in developing this step of the recovery effort. However, because of the increased risk associated with these temporary appliances and their long-term use, we are requesting additional information about your company’s response to this disaster and what products you are making available to the affected residents. For peace of mind and the sake of transparency, we ask that you provide more detail on what risk assessments were conducted and what alternatives were considered.

The series of gas fires and explosions on September 13, 2018 resulted in the death of one teenager, injured approximately 25 others, and damaged or destroyed dozens of homes, leaving thousands of Massachusetts residents and businesses without gas service. Columbia Gas is currently working on replacing 48 miles of pipelines that provide service to thousands of people in the Merrimack Valley region,³ as well as assessing and replacing damaged home appliances. You have assured these families that gas service for all homes and businesses would be restored on a rolling basis by November 19, 2018. It is vital that you complete the repairs as quickly and safely as possible, before the upcoming winter season. But each day that the damaged pipelines

¹ Boston Globe, “Baker, Columbia Gas unveil massive recovery plan,” Milton J. Valencia, Matt Rocheleau, & Laura Crimaldi, September 21, 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/09/21/baker-and-columbia-gas-unveil-recovery-plan-handing-out-cooktops-and-space-heaters/W12WT14WNja10c1iOkzd9O/story.html>.

² Masslive, “Andover firefighters respond to grease fire caused by hot plate distributed as ‘temporary relief measure’ Monday night,” Jacqueline Tempera, September 25, 2018, https://www.masslive.com/news/boston/index.ssf/2018/09/andover_firefighters_respond_t.html.

³ Boston Globe, “Pressure inside Columbia Gas pipes was 12 times higher than normal,” Milton J. Valencia & Matt Rocheleau, September 17, 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/09/17/officials-will-create-foundation-help-speed-gas-explosion-recovery-effort-merrimack-valley/IaIlvKvqXUvCS67ZNvZuVM/story.html>; City of Lawrence, “Lawrence Gas Emergency,” <http://cityoflawrence.com/718/Lawrence-Gas-Emergency>.

and appliances are not replaced and gas service is not fully restored is another day that thousands of constituents live without hot water and have to rely on hot plates and space heaters to put dinner on the table and keep their families warm.

Last week, you announced that Columbia Gas will be making available “nearly 7,000 self-contained hot plate units to customers who need them for cooking until natural gas service is restored ... followed by a similar distribution of space heaters.”⁴ Governor Baker has declared a State of Emergency and activated the Massachusetts National Guard to assist with the distribution of these appliances while “teams of electricians, plumbers, and assessors” conduct the necessary assessments prior to the installations.⁵ It is reassuring to see that you are coordinating with state and local officials and conducting assessments in homes before distributing these appliances. However, there are several issues that remain unaddressed.

You indicated in your short-term mitigation plan announcement that you are “exploring alternative home heating options”⁶ for Merrimack Valley residents affected by the gas service outage that do not meet the required criteria for space heater installation. It remains unclear what options are available to these residents and what if any steps you have taken to prioritize their service. A recent Boston Globe article indicates that the number of homes that cannot support space heaters is substantial, with inspectors stating that “many of the homes inspected so far first need a costly, and potentially time-consuming, replacement of their electrical service” before they would be able to safely receive and operate space heaters.⁷

It is also encouraging to see fire safety experts and officials provide safety tips to residents in order “to reduce the added fire risk these items pose.”⁸ However, the risks associated with these products are still real. A recent FEMA report found that portable heater fires “caused an estimated 90 deaths, 175 injuries and \$84 million in property loss ... [and] were involved in 43 percent of fatal heating fires in residential buildings,” each year, from 2013- 2015.⁹ From 2007 to 2016, space heaters caused 139 reported fires and seven deaths in Massachusetts.¹⁰ Because of the increased risk associated with the use of these appliances, the quality of the products and safe-use advice you provide to the impacted residents are critical.

Further, your company’s *Outline of Claims Handling for Customers Impacted by Natural Gas Event* notes that Columbia Gas will reimburse residential and businesses customers “for

⁴ NiSource, “New Recovery and Gas Line Replacement Efforts Launched for the Greater Lawrence Area,” press release, September 21, 2018, <https://investor.shareholder.com/ni/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=1077245>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ NiSource, “New Recovery and Gas Line Replacement Efforts Launched for the Greater Lawrence Area,” press release, September 21, 2018, <https://investor.shareholder.com/ni/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=1077245>.

⁷ Milton J. Valencia and Cristela Guerra, “Space heaters are unsafe for many homes hit by gas outages in Merrimack Valley,” Boston Globe, September 27, 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/09/26/bid-add-space-heaters-stymied-older-electrical-systems/vDj5rd3mjEHk4am3M536vJ/story.html>.

⁸ Department of Fire Services, “Fire Officials Offer Safety Advice for Merrimack Valley Residents,” press release, September 23, 2018, <https://www.mass.gov/news/fire-officials-offer-safety-advice-for-merrimack-valley-residents>.

⁹ Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Portable Heater Fires in Residential Buildings (2013-2015),” October 2017, <https://www.usfa.fema.gov/downloads/pdf/statistics/v18i8.pdf>.

¹⁰ Milton J. Valencia and Cristela Guerra, “Space heaters are unsafe for many homes hit by gas outages in Merrimack Valley,” Boston Globe, September 27, 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/09/26/bid-add-space-heaters-stymied-older-electrical-systems/vDj5rd3mjEHk4am3M536vJ/story.html>.

reasonable costs of permanently switching to an alternative fuel source.” The outline also notes that residents who “wish to temporarily switch to appliances and systems that are fueled by sources other than natural gas for the duration of the outage, and then return to gas-fueled appliances ... will [receive] reimburse[ments] for reasonable costs associated with both the temporary solution as well as the return to gas-fueled appliances and systems.”¹¹ However, it fails to provide a detailed explanation of how you calculate and what you consider to be a “reasonable cost.”

Thousands of families have had their lives turned upside by the gas explosions through no fault of their own. We are deeply concerned about the effects that months of repairs will have on the thousands of Merrimack Valley residents and businesses—especially if these families have to rely on these appliances for an extended period of time while the restoration work is conducted. In order to better understand your company’s response and strategy moving forward in the wake of this unprecedented emergency, I ask that you provide answers to the following questions no later than October 12, 2018.

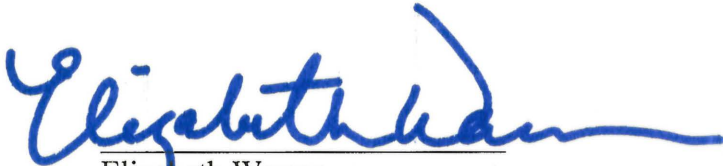
1. Fire and safety experts have expressed concerns about the increased fire risks associated with widespread use of space heaters and hot plates, particularly in the older and more densely settled neighborhoods with potentially outdated electrical systems. At least one residential fire has been reported due to the use of a hot plate.¹²
 - a. Did you consider any alternatives to distributing hot plates and space heaters?
 - b. If so, what alternatives did you consider and why did you reject them?
 - c. Was the cost of providing other alternatives a consideration in rejecting these alternatives?
2. Hot plates are currently being distributed by your employees, the National Guard, and local claim centers workers.
 - a. What brand(s) and model number(s) of hot plates are being distributed to residents?
 - b. How did you decide to use these particular brands(s) and model(s)?
 - i. What other brands and models were considered?
 - ii. Was cost a factor in your choice?
 - c. Did you consult independent experts to identify the safest models?
 - d. Have the hot plates you are distributing been approved by a Nationally Recognized Testing Laboratory (NRTL), such as Underwriter’s Laboratory (UL)?
 - e. Do the hot plates being distributed have auto shut offs?
 - f. Do they have child safety locks?
 - g. What other safety features do they have?
3. What brand(s) and model number(s) of space heaters are being distributed to residents?

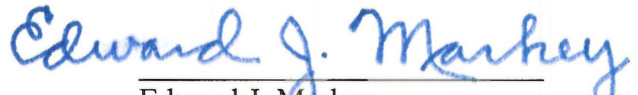
¹¹ Columbia Gas, “Outline of Claims Handling for Customers Impacted by Natural Gas Event,” <http://andoverma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/5140/Columbia-Gas-Claims-Info?bidId>.

¹² Masslive, “Andover firefighters respond to grease fire caused by hot plate distributed as ‘temporary relief measure’ Monday night,” Jacqueline Tempera, September 25, 2018, https://www.masslive.com/news/boston/index.ssf/2018/09/andover_firefighters_respond_t.html

- a. How did you decide to use these particular brands(s) and model(s)?
 - i. What other brands and models were considered?
 - ii. Was cost a factor in your choice?
 - b. Did you consult independent experts to identify the safest models?
 - c. Have the electric space heaters that will be distributed been approved by a Nationally Recognized Testing Laboratory (NRTL), such as Underwriter's Laboratory (UL)?
 - d. What safety features do they have?
4. How are electricians conducting assessments to determine if homes meet safety standards for provision of electric hot plates or space heaters?
 - a. We understand smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors are being installed as inspectors assess houses for space heaters. Is this also occurring as part of the distribution of hot plates?
 5. Are residents specifically and individually being counseled on safety measures for operating these devices when they are delivered, such as not using extension cords to power space heaters or electric cooktops? If so, by whom? If not, why not?
 - a. We understand language translators are being made available during the distribution process. Are any safety guidance materials or warnings being distributed also available in other languages, as needed?
 6. If electricians determine that a residence does not meet safety standards and cannot be issued a hot plate or space heater, what alternatives are provided to those families?
 - a. What percentage of inspected homes, so far, has been deemed unable to receive a space heater?
 7. Will you be prioritizing gas service restoration for families with a residence that does not meet safety standards for electric cooktops or space heaters?
 - a. Once you determine a residence does not meet safety standards for electric cooktops or space heaters - are you communicating to the affected families what options and alternatives are available to them and when they should expect to have an alternative and temporary solution and/or gas service fully restored? If not, how and when do you plan to do so?
 8. How do you plan to determine what is a "reasonable cost" of switching to an alternative fuel source when reimbursing residents affected by the outage?
 - a. Would an increase in utility bills caused by extended use of the hot plate and space heater appliances provided by your company be part of that reimbursement?
 9. Are you planning on providing up-front financial assistance for residents who cannot afford to buy electric water heaters and then be reimbursed after their purchase?

Sincerely,


Elizabeth Warren
U.S. Senator


Edward J. Markey
U.S. Senator

cc:

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