

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 02, 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 updated and significantly delayed timeline for restoring gas service in the Merrimack Valley communities of Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover. You previously assured residents affected by the September natural gas explosions that you would aim to restore gas service to residences and businesses by November 19, 2018.¹ However, last Friday, you adjusted the timeline for gas restoration for some affected residents to be as late as December 16, 2018, more than three months after the initial explosion. Temperatures are dropping, and this failure to meet your deadline means thousands of Merrimack Valley families and seniors will remain displaced and in jeopardy of freezing cold weather. It remains unclear how many residents will remain displaced and without gas service after November 19, which will continue to cause significant hardship: average daily low temperatures in Lawrence historically drop almost ten degrees, from 32.5 degrees to 23.7 degrees, between November 19 and December 16.²

According to the most recent daily briefing you provided, as of November 1, 2018, only 18 percent of the more than 7,000 affected residences were ready to have natural gas services restored. To qualify as “house ready,” qualified workers need to have replaced all damaged pipes and replaced or repaired all affected appliances. You initially indicated that in the week ending on October 28, you would make 1,291 residential meters house ready. In fact, only 499 meters were made house ready. The November 1 briefing also notes service has only been restored to 176 of 685 business customers – only 26 percent of all those affected. Earlier this month, the Small Business Administration granted Massachusetts’ request for disaster assistance to impacted small businesses, but that is no substitute for having restored service.

Based on projections from your daily briefings and assuming you meet your next two weekly targets, it appears that over 3,300 residential meters – nearly half of affected meters - will still have to be made “house ready” after the initial November 19 deadline. More than 7,000 Merrimack Valley residents are already living out of temporary housing as they wait for their homes to be repaired and service to be restored, and that number is only likely to rise.

¹ NiSource, “Columbia Gas Announces ‘House Ready’ Plan for Greater Lawrence Area,” press release, October 5, 2018, <https://investor.shareholder.com/ni/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=1078282>.

² U.S. Climate Data, “Climate Lawrence – Massachusetts,” accessed on October 30, 2018, <https://www.usclimatedata.com/climate/lawrence/massachusetts/united-states/usma0210>.

We are deeply concerned about the effect that this delayed restoration process and updated timeline will have on Merrimack Valley residents and businesses. We ask that you provide answers to the following questions no later than November 16, 2018.

1. What is the specific reason for the delays in restorations of service?
2. Your initial reports indicated that the September 13 disaster affected 8,570 meters. Later restoration briefings listed this number as 8,447 total meters, 675 of which are business meters and 7,772 of which are residential meters.³ This number has also fluctuated to 7,342 residential meters in other briefings.⁴ Additionally, when the planned number of residential meters made house ready week by week is summed up, it equals 8,668 residential meters. Please provide an explanation for these discrepancies, as well as a correct final accounting of how many meters are affected, how many residences and businesses are affected, and how many individuals are affected.
3. Based on your residential restoration projections, it appears that over 3,300 residences will not be “house ready” by November 19, 2018. How many individuals lived in these residences prior to September 13, 2018 and will have to remain displaced after November 19, 2018 as a result of the updated timeline?
4. How many of these individuals live in each of the affected communities – Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover?
5. What special precautions will you be taking to ensure that the affected homes do not suffer additional damage – such as frozen pipes or leaking roofs – from lying empty during the colder and more extreme temperatures in December?
6. Does Columbia Gas plan to provide reimbursements to affected residents for all medical care costs, including mental health services and psychological counseling, associated with the September 13 explosions and the resulting longer-term disruption to daily life?
7. Columbia Gas has been operating in Massachusetts for decades. How did the company fail to anticipate the challenges that come from conducting repairs in older homes when determining its restoration plan?
8. You announced that Columbia Gas will not immediately replace appliances if you find that they can safely operate with repairs “in order to expedite the restoration of natural gas service to all of [your] customers,” and promised that you would “return at a later date to replace” those appliances. What is your timeline for fully replacing all appliances that you have determined can “safely operate with repairs”⁵?

³ Columbia Gas, “Daily Briefing,” October 25, 2018.

⁴ Columbia Gas, “Daily Briefing,” October 26, 2018.

⁵ Columbia Gas, “Making Your Home ‘House Ready’,”

<https://www.columbiagas.com/massachusetts/restoration/house-ready>.

9. Columbia Gas has committed to reimbursing affected customers for all out-of-pocket costs not covered by their insurance policies.
 - a. Can you make information on how Columbia Gas is reimbursing customers who have used their insurance for repairs publicly available on the restoration website and in additional communication materials?
 - b. Can you commit to covering all costs for any damage caused by frozen pipes that residents are liable for under their insurance policies?
 - c. Can you commit to covering any additional insurance costs incurred because of homeowners or renters not being present in their residences, which can increase liability under some plans?


10. Columbia Gas has committed to reimbursing claims for lost wages for residents who miss work in order to be home for repair work. Can you make this information public on the restoration website and disseminate it in other communication materials?

11. Please provide additional details on the winterization program that was discussed at the recent town halls.
 - a. Will this include home energy efficiency updates?
 - b. Who is working on developing the winterization policy?
 - c. What resources is Columbia Gas devoting to the winterization program?
 - d. Who will be eligible for the winterization program?
 - e. When will winterization work begin?

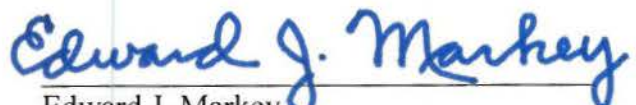
12. Please provide additional details on the status of the claims process.
 - a. How fast are claims being addressed and resolved?
 - b. What percentage of claims have been accepted?

We look forward to your prompt response. Should you have any questions, please contact Ashley Coulombe in Senator Warren's office at 671-565-3170.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator