

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

September 27, 2019

Mark Kempic
President and Chief Operating Officer
Columbia Gas of Massachusetts
P.O. Box 2025
Springfield, MA 01102

Joe Hamrock
President and Chief Executive Officer
NiSource
4 Technology Drive
Westborough, MA 01581

Dear Messrs. Kempic and Hamrock:

We are writing today to express our ongoing concern and request information about a new major gas leak in Lawrence that forced over 300 people to evacuate their homes in the middle of the night. The cause of the leak remains unknown; however, reports indicate that “the volume of gas released was in the ‘explosive range,’”¹ and that the leak reportedly originated from a new high-pressure line Columbia Gas installed following the September 2018 explosions that damaged over 130 structures, destroyed five homes, injured first responders, left thousands of Merrimack Valley residents without heat or hot water, and cost a young man his life.² After the incident this morning, 1,300 customers were once again without power, just two weeks after the first anniversary of last year’s catastrophic explosions.³

Just three days ago, on September 24, 2019, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) released a damning report placing significant blame on Columbia Gas and NiSource for the September 13, 2018 overpressurization event that caused the explosions. The report found Columbia Gas’ “inadequate planning, documents and recordkeeping processes,” and its weak formal risk assessment process provided the probable cause of the overpressurization event.⁴ After the release of the NTSB report, you claimed that, “we have taken a series of steps to

¹ Boston Globe, “‘Major’ gas leak in Lawrence leads to school closures and evacuation of at least 100 people,” Abbi Matheson and Emily Sweeney, September 27, 2019, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/09/27/major-gas-leak-reported-lawrence/EoJn1NlpLEmL9tntLZPQbN/story.html>.

² National Transportation Safety Board, “Overpressurized Gas Distribution System Caused Explosions, Fires,” press release, September 24, 2019, <https://www.nts.gov/news/press-releases/Pages/NR20190924.aspx>.

³ Boston Globe, “‘Major’ gas leak in Lawrence leads to school closures and evacuation of at least 100 people,” Abbi Matheson and Emily Sweeney, September 27, 2019, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/09/27/major-gas-leak-reported-lawrence/EoJn1NlpLEmL9tntLZPQbN/story.html>.

⁴ National Transportation Safety Board, “Overpressurization of Natural Gas Distribution System, Explosions, and Fires in Merrimack Valley, Massachusetts,” September 24, 2019, <https://www.nts.gov/news/events/Documents/2019-PLD18MR003-BMG-abstract.pdf>.

prevent something similar from happening again, which is what our customers and our communities deserve.”⁵

Thousands of families had their lives turned upside down last year because of the natural gas fires and explosions. We are deeply concerned to see that Lawrence residents have to deal with these same issues and threats to their safety and livelihood. It is vital that you promptly restore gas service to the homes and businesses affected in Lawrence, and that you conduct an investigation into the cause as quickly as possible. In order to help us better understand the circumstances of the leak and your response and strategy moving forward in the wake of this emergency, we ask that you provide a briefing on the cause of and response to the incident and answers to the following questions no later than October 1, 2019.

1. Please provide a summary of the cause of the gas leak. Was Columbia Gas or its employees or contractors in any way responsible for this leak?
2. Please provide any and all internal or other investigations of the cause of this incident.
3. Please provide a list of all new actions taken by the company in response to this incident.
4. Reports indicate that the leak was detected around 3:00 AM, but power was not cut to the area until 4:30 AM and gas was reportedly not shut off until 5:08 AM.⁶ When did Columbia Gas become aware of a problem, and what actions did it take in response?
5. Why did it take approximately 90 minutes after the leak began for power to be cut in the area, and more than two hours for Columbia Gas to shut down the flow of gas?
6. Did Columbia Gas recognize the leak on its own, or was it the result of reporting by residents or first responders?
7. Were any pressure abnormalities detected by Columbia Gas control operators and if not, why not, given that this appears to have been a significant leak?
8. Was the pipe that leaked one that was replaced in the response to the September 13, 2018 disaster? If so, was it inserted into an abandoned main or was it buried separately?

⁵ Columbia Gas, NiSource Statement on NTSB Investigation, Sep. 24, 2019,


<https://www.columbiagas.com/massachusetts/news-center/article/nisource-statement-on-ntsb-investigation-cg>.

⁶ CBS Boston, “150 Lawrence Homes, Businesses Evacuated Due To Major Columbia Gas Leak,” September 27, 2019, <https://boston.cbslocal.com/2019/09/27/lawrence-gas-leak-evacuations-power-outages-columbia-gas-south-broadway-salem-street/>; CNN, “Evacuations are underway for a gas leak in a Massachusetts city where gas explosions happened a year ago,” Madeline Holcombe and Joe Sutton, September 27, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/27/us/lawrence-gas-leak-evacuation/index.html>.


9. Is Columbia Gas conducting a full risk assessment on its other mains in the Merrimack Valley system and in its other Massachusetts service areas to see if other mains may be at risk of a similar leak? If not, why not?
10. What quantity of gas was released in this major leak?
11. How did Columbia Gas communicate with first responders and local officials after being alerted to the leak? Please provide a timeline of all contact, noting any new communication policies that have been put into place following the September 13, 2018 disaster.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Lori Trahan
Member of Congress