

CONSUMER MATTERS

Vermont Department of Public Service
Consumer Affairs and Public Information Division



The Consumer Affairs & Public Information (CAPI) Division assists consumers with reaching informal resolution of complaints against regulated utilities, advocates for policies and rules that protect consumer interests and educates consumers about utility issues. CAPI responds to public inquiries and complaints about utility practices either specific to the consumer's situation or in general.

CAPI monitors utility performance against service quality standards, as well as to the adherence to consumer protection rules established by the Public Service Board. CAPI provides support and trainings to utilities and consumer advocate groups regarding Board rules to reduce the incidence of consumer complaints by improving utility practices.

Recent Accomplishments and Activities

- CAPI managed and facilitated the **Community Needs Assessment** process for two utilities who were both seeking renewal of their Certificates of Public Good (CPG). Those utilities are Burlington Telecom and Comcast.
- CAPI submitted testimony in Docket 8606 for **Burlington Electric Department’s (BED) Overall Performance Assessment** which addressed BED’s Order of Appointment to serve as an Energy Efficiency Utility. CAPI reviewed six years of complaints and found no substantive customer service issues.
- Per **Act 56**, CAPI reached out to organizations across Vermont that represent low income consumers, elders and small businesses to facilitate meetings with the Commissioner about how utility rates impact the populations they serve. Ten organizations were contacted, seven requested meetings and all seven were referred to the Commissioner’s office for scheduling.
- CAPI, in partnership with the Department’s Public Advocacy and

Table 1 2016 CAPI Contacts with Consumers

Company Type	# of contacts
Biodigester	1*
Broadband	231
Cable	450
Electric	437
Telephone (landline)	355
Natural Gas	48
Solar	17*
Water	19
Wind	9*
Wireless	108
Other	24
Complaint total	1699
Referrals	
Referrals to Attorney General	64
Referrals to utility providers	1535
Other referrals	36
TOTAL CONTACTS	3334

*includes complaints about CPG conditions, see Table 2 CPG complaints

Finance and Economic Divisions, began producing **Rate Case Bulletins**. These bulletins describe proposed changes to utility rates and how consumers can provide public comments and feedback. Bulletins are published on the Department’s website.

- Per a Memorandum of Understanding resulting from the FairPoint Service Quality Investigation Docket (8390), approximately 32,000 trouble tickets were credited. Our experts estimated that the average credit for residential customers was \$3.58 and the average credit for commercial customers was \$9.00.
- The Department of Public Service developed a **protocol for handling complaints** about the potential failure of a Certificate of Public Good (CPG) holder to comply with the terms and conditions of a CPG issued by the Public Service Board under 30 V.S.A. §248 or 248a. The purpose of the protocol is to create a single location within State government to receive, track, respond to and report on all complaints of a potential CPG violation. Under this protocol, it is now the responsibility of CAPI to receive and respond to all CPG complaints.

Table 2. CPG Complaints 4th Quarter 2016 Consolidated by Project

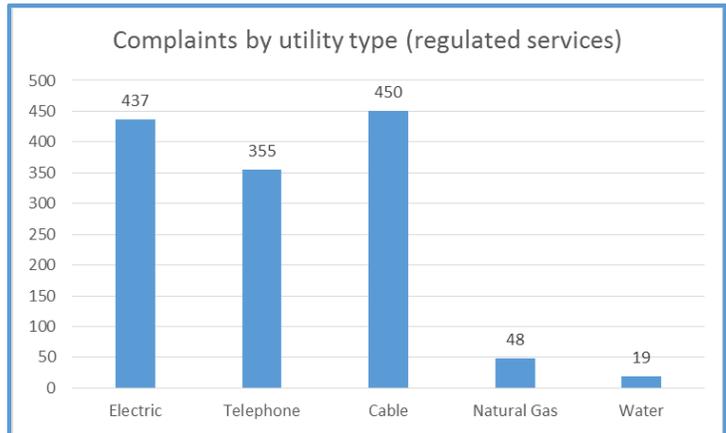
Energy Type	Project town	Other complaints in past 6 months?	Type of complaint	Investigated?	Potential violation?	Resolved by CAPI?	Referred to PSB?	Referred to ANR
Wind	Georgia	No	Noise	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Solar	Norwich	No	Siting/ Wetlands*	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Wind	Vergennes	No	Noise	No **				
Solar	Groton	No	Siting/ Aesthetics/notice	Yes	In progress		No	No

*CAPI research indicated the site was not a wetland. However, the complainant was advised that they could file a complaint directly with the Agency of Natural Resources (ANR). **Complaint was not investigated because of lack of response/follow up from the complainant.

- CAPI reviewed disconnection notices for many utilities and enforced compliance as needed when a utility was not following Public Service Board rules.
- The Lifeline program expands to wireless services. The Department worked closely with the Agency of Human Services Department for Children and Families to facilitate compliance with Federal eligibility processes and support three new wireless providers entering the Vermont market. Two companies are now providing services and a third is working actively to provide services shortly.

Protecting Vulnerable Vermonters

The Department of Public Service through the Consumer Affairs and Public Information Division addresses some of the unique issues that Vermont’s low income and elderly population face and the disproportionate “energy burden” that they carry. These programs include: Green Mountain Power’s Electric Assistance Program (EAP), Vermont Gas’s Low Income Assistance Program (LIAP) and the Lifeline telephone program.



Electric Assistance Program (EAP)

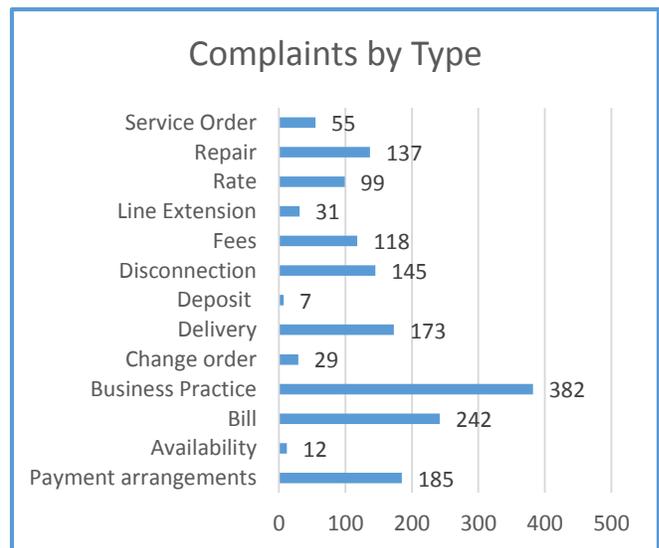
GMP offers a 25% discount for the monthly customer charge and electricity used by an eligible low income GMP residential customer. All GMP customers at or below 150% of the federal poverty level are eligible for this program and are qualified through the Vermont Department for Children and Families Economic Services Division. This program is funded through a legislated monthly charge on every GMP customer’s electric bill based on class of service.

Low Income Assistance Program (LIAP)

Vermont Gas (VGS) offers the Low Income Assistance Program (LIAP), which provides a 20% discount to income-eligible residential customers. The discount applies to all three components of the natural gas bill including the Daily Access Charge, the Natural Gas Charge and the Distribution Charge. The LIAP is funded by an Assistance Program Fee paid by all VGS customers. Eligibility is determined by the Vermont Department for Children and Families Economic Services Division.

Lifeline

Lifeline is a federal program that provides a monthly discount on phone or internet service to eligible households in the amount of \$9.25. Only one Lifeline benefit—either wireless or landline phone, home internet or cell phone data plan—is allowed per household. Not all internet services will qualify for the discount. Only those internet offerings at speeds of 10/1 Mbps and above will qualify, with certain exceptions. Vermont’s Universal Service Fund provides an additional discount on telephone service only, and the amount varies between companies depending upon the cost of service, but may not exceed \$7.00 per month.



CAPI by the Numbers

\$146,587 – Total dollars saved by consumers through CAPI resolutions

117 – Vermonters successfully assisted who were in danger of losing electric, natural gas or telephone service, or whose services were already disconnected; or those for whom CAPI negotiated payment arrangements which allowed them to keep service on or have service reconnected.

3,334 – Total contacts with Vermont consumers.

1,635 – Referrals to utilities and the Attorney General's office.

1,699 – Total complaints investigated or researched on behalf of Vermont consumers including both residential and commercial accounts, as well as unregulated services such as broadband and wireless complaints.

Data for calendar year 2016

Public Involvement

The Department encourages public input, involvement and opinions about the issues and utilities over which it and the Public Service Board have regulatory oversight. The public can get involved with rate cases or other dockets pending before the Public Service Board either by attending and speaking at a public hearing held by the Public Service Board, or by providing written comments by email or mail to the Public Service Board. You may also provide written comments to the Department of Public Service Consumer Affairs and Public Information Division to let us know what you think about rate cases or other issues the Department is working on.

Contact Us

Consumer Affairs Hotline: 800-622-4496

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General Phone Number: 802-828-2332

Fax: 802-828-2342

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Address: 112 State Street Second Floor • Montpelier, VT • 05620-2601

Useful Links

Vermont Department of Public Service at <http://publicservice.vermont.gov/>

Vermont Public Service Board at <http://psb.vermont.gov/>

Rate Case Bulletins can be found at <http://publicservice.vermont.gov/content/rate-case-bulletins>

Lifeline Program, at <http://www.lifelinesupport.org/ls/default.aspx>