

Hydro One investigation update – March 11, 2015

Ombudsman's remarks – André Marin

Just 13 months ago, right here in this room, I announced an investigation into billing and customer service problems at Hydro One. At that point, we had more than 600 complaints. In the next three days, another 1,500 complaints came in, from all over the province. The total soon surpassed any investigation in my Office's history. This week, it reached 10,000 complaints, and there are still more every day.

I'm speaking about this today for a few reasons. First, I want to bring Ontarians up to date on our investigation, which is still going on. My Special Ombudsman Response Team has been digging into the broad, systemic problems behind this unprecedented number of unhappy customers. We have started to draft our report, and I plan to release it in the coming months. At that time, I will share my findings and recommendations with you.

Second, I want to report on some of the thousands of individual cases we have already resolved. Some of them are frankly shocking. We've seen absurdly high bills and atrocious customer service. We've seen the same astounding errors over and over again – people charged \$10,000, even \$20,000 at a time, when what they really owe is closer to \$100. Many of these horror stories have become success stories, after our staff worked with Hydro One to bring these bills back to reality. I've released brief summaries of some of these cases today as examples.

The third reason is because of a matter of urgent public interest that really couldn't wait for the publication of a formal report. Over the past few months – during one of the coldest winters in memory – Hydro One has been threatening to cut off people's power for unpaid bills.

Hydro One promised us it would not cut anyone off. But that's not what it told the people who were calling us in tears, distraught with fear that they and their families would have no power if they didn't pay an outrageous bill.

One father of a newborn and a six-year-old near London called us in a panic because Hydro One sent him a disconnection notice on Valentine's Day – remember how cold it was then? They demanded that he pay his \$3,200 bill right away. We received almost 100 complaints this winter from people in similar situations.

Hydro One admitted to us that these notices are just empty threats. They called it a "tactic" to encourage payment. I think most people would call it something much worse.

We gave Hydro One a chance to resolve this issue before making it public – that’s normal ombudsman practice. My deputy and I met personally with the CEO. I urged him to end the cruel disconnection threats and state publicly that no one would be cut off. I warned him that I would report publicly on this, and that my threat was not an empty one.

That was more than two weeks ago, and the complaints about disconnection threats kept coming in. Finally, yesterday at 4:55 p.m., we received a response from Hydro One, saying they had revised their disconnection letters because of my concerns. The new letter warns people they might be cut off “depending on weather conditions.” In my view, this is no better – in fact, it’s worse.

Hydro One has co-operated with us throughout this investigation. I hope we will see a more productive response as it draws to a close.

Finally, to anyone who is still having problems with Hydro One, we are still taking complaints and we’ll do our best to help. I look forward to sharing my report with you in a few months; in the meantime, I’m happy to take your questions about the information I’ve released today.