



## OFFICE OF THE FIRST SELECTMAN

### ***ENERGY & TECHNOLOGY***

#### Storm Response Informational Hearing September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Good Morning, my name is Michael R. Criss, I am the First Selectman for the Town of Harwinton and I am the Legislative Liaison for the Northwest Hills Council of Governments. I would like to thank the co-chairs and the ranking members of the General Assemblies Energy & Technology Committee for putting together draft legislation and for hosting the listening session today. I appreciate the opportunity to submit this testimony in hopes to work together as local and state partners ensuring Connecticut's public utilities are better prepared for future natural disasters that will surely come our way again.

The Town of Harwinton supports LCO 39-20 as a working draft to provide transparency and recourse necessary to improve Connecticut's storm response and recovery. Harwinton, like many municipalities across the state, experienced a 'lack-luster' performance and next to no response from Eversource in the first 48 – 72 hours of Storm Isais. Eversource failed the State of Connecticut by not communicating in a truthful, responsible manner to town liaisons and municipalities. This failure and lack of communication starts from the top down and requires nothing short of a massive overhaul of communication, policies & procedure and a revamp of storm response efforts by Eversource to fix this problem. Eversource must and should work with local municipalities and mandatory consumer advocates in order to better prepare for future response efforts. Although I support the draft bill overall, there are key points that I believe are critical to fixing this broken system and holding all utility companies (including but not limited to i.e.; Eversource, Frontier, Charter/Spectrum, who all had 'lack-luster' and/or no response) responsible for an improved and efficient storm response plan that should, at the very least, include accurate, complete communication with local municipalities on an hourly basis. Below I have listed some other key points that I feel this proposed bill either addresses or can improve on;

- PURA should establish performance metrics and standards that should include municipal engagement.
- Utility companies must establish regional service centers run by Connecticut based staff and a permanent Connecticut incident command team which should require municipal coordination to ensure that the regional service centers, and the communities they serve, have continual communication and coordination.

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- DEEP should be required to perform an assessment of the State's energy and its capacity to determine whether the current market structure is supportive of the department's policy objectives.
- A requirement that the Northeast Utilities and NSTAR Merger settlement agreement ensures that any commitments to the state are kept. Customer service and municipal engagement has diminished since the merger.
- There must be an establishment of an independent consumer advocate within the OCC, PURA and on the board of directors for all utility companies. This will ensure that the consumers will have a voice and the companies have proper feedback regarding response efforts and costs.
- Utility companies including but not limited to Eversource, Frontier, Charter/Spectrum should be required to hold quarterly meetings with municipal CEOs establishing and providing direct POCs from each company during a natural disaster and/or weather event.
- If an energy conservation board is established under this draft bill, section 22, it must be mandated that a municipal representative serves on such board with direct collaboration with the Councils of Governments.

Current process failures that need improvement immediately before the next natural disaster strikes. These are important because we do not know how long this pandemic of COVID-19 will continue to disrupt the economy and the lives our residents:

- Utility companies failed municipalities when town liaisons, or lack thereof, lacked the knowledge and the honest & correct information to communicate with municipalities and to command line and tree crews. No longer will the response of "I don't know" be acceptable to municipal CEOs.
- Municipalities stood ready around the state with their local Public Works Departments to follow a make-safe protocol set forth by the utility companies.
- There was no process or even plan to communicate with utilities when emails and phones were not working.
- All information during this latest storm event reflected directly on the lack of leadership, coordination and the severe inaccuracy of information.
- The first and most devastating failure of the utilities companies was the lack of following "make-safe" protocols which includes clearing roadways of downed wires and trees. This should have been of the utmost priority and been coordinated with local and municipal DPWs.
- The utility company failed to support "make-safe" operations in favor of restoring power where it could've easily been accomplished.
- It is evident that utility crews and tree crews were ill-equipped and underprepared to complete work once they were in an area of a town or city. Crews should have been better prepared to perform service immediately when they were in the town/cities once the weather event had diminished.

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- We must establish a clear, concise plan with no deviation between utilities, municipalities and state DOT of road clearings, power, cable and phone restoration. This can no longer be overlooked.

Just like in any aspect of our lives there is always room for improvement; utility companies are not exempt from this whatsoever. Below I have listed some but not all of possible improvements that would alleviate the frustration of residents dealing with lock-down pandemic and lack of utilities:

- Real-time, accurate communication between municipal CEOs & EMDs and corresponding recovery crews. Improving communication and providing municipal liaisons with accurate and real-time communication and authorizing municipalities and liaisons with on-the-ground authority would have alleviated much of the stress and frustration throughout the state. There was absolutely no communication amongst disciplines of restoration, town liaisons or municipalities.
- Restoration assets must be deployed ahead of a significant weather event or natural disaster to establish and improve efficiencies of restoration efforts. With that said, utility liaisons should be required and mandated to work from regional work centers to have a pulse on the response efforts.
- Municipal CEOs should have real-time access to information that can be provided to not only their constituents but to field crews with a concrete game plan for restoration. This would greatly improve local recovery efforts and would provide residents with more efficient and complete information of the progress or the lack thereof.

Again, I want to tell you how much I appreciate the opportunity to share some of my thoughts and concerns and want to assure you that I will make myself available to be called upon to help fix these ongoing issues. A true partnership must be made between utilities, state and local officials so that we may be better prepared to protect the residents of our community and this great state. We should not be trying to fix problems in the midst of an emergency.

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on behalf of the Town of Harwinton.

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