

Georgia Public Service Commission Plays Key Role in Consumer Protection

By Chuck Eaton

As we celebrate National Consumer Protection Week March 4-10, this is a great time to point out the vital role our Commission plays in consumer protection. The Georgia Public Service Commission has two major functions that are crucial to ensure consumer protection.

First, and probably the one area most consumers have familiarity, is our Consumer Affairs Department. Consisting of information referral specialists and case managers, this department receives complaints from consumers concerning utilities the Commission regulates. These specialists assist consumers in resolving complaints about billing errors, disconnections, and applying for senior citizen discounts. Our staff also conducts educational seminars to provide consumers with information on utility discounts and procedures. In 2017, our Consumer Affairs Unit received nearly 21,000 contacts by telephone, e-mail, fax or mail.

The second area is one most consumers are probably less familiar with, our Facilities Protection Unit. This unit protects our underground infrastructure and our natural gas pipeline distribution system. The pipeline safety function is carried out under an agreement with the Pipeline and Hazards Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) of the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). Pipeline safety inspectors are responsible for enforcing federal regulations for the safe installation and operation of natural gas pipelines. 2016 marked the 48th year of the Commission's relationship with PHMSA. The pipeline safety inspectors monitored and inspected over 1,200 miles of transmission lines, nearly 44,000 miles of distribution pipeline, and more than 2 million service lines for transporting natural gas to Georgia customers in 147 counties.

Our Utilities Facilities Protection Staff investigated 3,132 incidents in 2016, where violations of the Georgia Utilities Facilities Protection Act were alleged. This law is more commonly known as the "Call before You Dig Law." The enforcement actions during the year included 331 hearings, 566 consent agreements and 344 final orders. Of the 1,921 cases closed, 1,507 related to damaged natural gas lines. These 40 cases concluded with the Commission's levying \$5,156,500 in civil penalties, of which \$4 million was mitigated with training. The remaining amounts are disbursed to the state Treasury.

The Commission is tasked with protecting not only consumers' pocketbooks but also their safety. As we celebrate National Consumer Protection Week, we remain committed to our role in protecting Georgia consumers.

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