

STATE OF NEW YORK

Public Service Commission

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FOR RELEASE: IMMEDIATELY

09018

COMMISSION HELPS 300,000 CONSUMERS IN NEED

— More Than \$2.2 Million Returned to Customers —

Albany, NY—3/12/09—The New York State Public Service Commission (Commission) today announced that in 2008 staff assisted approximately 308,000 utility customers in resolving matters with utility companies about billing, service quality, and collections through its toll-free HELPLINE and Emergency Hotline, a 14 percent increase from the previous year.

Approximately 85,000 customers spoke directly with the Commission's Call Center staff, which provides assistance in both English and Spanish. An additional 11,000 customers contacted the Commission's staff by mail, the Internet, or by visiting one of its three offices in Albany, Buffalo and New York City for assistance. As a result of the assistance provided by the Commission's Office of Consumer Services staff, customers received more than \$2.2 million in bill credits and refunds.

“Staff plays a critical role in working directly with New Yorkers to ensure that they receive the Commission's essential consumer protections and rights regarding access to safe, adequate and reliable natural gas, electric, steam, water and telecommunications service,” said Commission Chairman Garry Brown. “Our Office of Consumer Services helps resolve customer issues with utilities by analyzing problems and developing solutions, one customer at a time, in a fair, thorough, and professional manner.”

In addition to resolving matters with utilities, staff is responsible for ensuring that the customers receive the assistance and protections they are entitled to under the Home Energy Fair

Practices Act (New York State's statute governing the provision of natural gas, electric and steam service to residential customers).

Chairman Brown further noted that: "In 2008, New Yorkers faced new challenges as energy prices rose, the economy weakened and consumers found it difficult to pay their utility bills. Many of these customers turned to the Commission for assistance."

The Commission's Office of Consumer Services, working with the major gas and electric companies in the state, took additional steps this winter to protect customers, especially the state's most vulnerable residents — the elderly, blind, disabled and low income — during the cold weather period. These steps encouraged the utilities to: accept all Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) grants; offer renegotiated deferred payment agreements to customers; refrain from terminating service during extremely severe winter weather; and offer utility payment assistance programs and budget billing to make monthly bills more manageable.

Commission staff also works closely with the state's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the Consumer Protection Board and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority to educate customers about the many ways in which they can control their energy costs, including making investments in energy efficiency, accessing social service programs and budget billing, and making informed choices about their energy supplies.

As it has in past years, Commission staff is reaching out to a statewide network of 3,500 consumer leaders and advocates that includes representatives of social service agencies, community organizations and local governments to assist them in providing information concerning utility-related matters affecting their constituents.

Additionally, Commission staff is working with the state's major utilities, encouraging them to use a variety of tools to educate customers on energy conservation and efficiency, and to provide advice about payment plans and financial assistance programs. Staff will continue to monitor the utilities' implementation of education plans and work with the utilities to initiate additional outreach activities, as the need arises.

As part of the Commission's outreach efforts in 2008, over 4.2 million visits were made to the Commission's www.AskPSC.com Web site. Also, Commission staff interacted with tens of thousands of New Yorkers at over 147 events for the general public and distributed over 1.5 million bilingual educational materials.

Consumers interested in filing a billing or service complaint with the Commission can call the toll-free HELPLINE at 1-800-342-3377 (8:30 am – 4:00 pm, Monday – Friday). Consumers threatened with residential electric or gas shut off should call the Emergency Hotline at 1-800-342-3355 (7:30 am – 7:30 pm, Monday – Friday). Any consumer wanting to file a complaint or get information may visit the Commission's www.AskPSC.com Web site.