

STATE OF NEW YORK

Public Service Commission

Garry A. Brown, Chairman

Three Empire State Plaza, Albany, NY 12223

Further Details: James Denn, (518) 474-7080

<http://www.dps.state.ny.us>

FOR RELEASE: IMMEDIATELY

PSC BOOSTS ASSISTANCE TO UTILITY CUSTOMERS

—\$4M Returned to Customers in 2009; Almost Double 2008 Credits—

Albany, NY—04/01/10—The New York State Public Service Commission (Commission) today announced that Commission staff provided assistance to more than 282,000 utility customers in 2009, assistance leading to more than \$4 million in bill credits and refunds, up from \$2.2 million in 2008. In addition, utility customers were assisted with billing, service and other matters via the Commission's toll-free help lines and emergency hotlines, a continually updated website, through visits to its offices in Albany, Buffalo and New York City, or at more than 250 outreach and education statewide events staff participated in.

“This Commission strives to ensure essential consumer protections and rights regarding the services provided by our utilities,” said Commission Chairman Garry Brown. “Ensuring consumer protection requires more than just monitoring utilities to minimize missteps. It requires providing information to consumers about their rights, protections and available assistance programs. Our staff plays a critical role in working directly with consumers to help them understand their rights and resolve issues they have with their utilities in a fair and equitable manner.”

In addition to resolving matters with utilities, staff is responsible for ensuring customers receive the assistance and protections they are entitled to under the Home Energy Fair Practices Act, which governs the provision of natural gas, electric and steam service to residential customers. Working with the major gas and electric companies in the state, Commission staff took additional steps this past winter to assist customers, especially the state's most vulnerable residents — the elderly, blind, disabled and low income. These steps include offering

renegotiated deferred payment agreements, refraining from terminating service during extremely severe winter weather, offering utility payment assistance programs, and encouraging the use of budget billing to make monthly bills more manageable.

During these extraordinarily difficult economic times, the Commission required as part utility rate plans austerity measures and other provisions to reduce economic burdens on hard-pressed consumers. In 2009, significant enhancements were also made to Central Hudson Gas and Electric Corporation's, Consolidated Edison of New York, Inc.'s, and National Grid's low income programs for electric service customers. Statewide, the total number of participants increased from about 672,000 to about 744,000 customers. Total annual funding for energy utility low-income programs in the state increased from \$54.5 million in 2008 to \$62.8 million in 2009, a jump of 15 percent.

Staff also carried out a statewide outreach and education program to raise consumer awareness and understanding of utility service issues and ensure consumers have the information and understanding they need to make informed decisions regarding their utility services. In 2009, Commission staff launched a statewide effort to raise awareness, both for residential and non-residential customers, regarding their rights and protections. In addition, Commission staff led the state's participation in the National Lifeline Discount Telephone Awareness Week initiative designed to provide valuable information about the discounts available to low-income New Yorkers for basic telephone service.

As in the past years, staff interacts with the public using a variety of outreach activities, including educational forums, outreach events, mailings, toll-free telephone lines, the Internet, and partnership programs. In 2009, Commission staff participated in approximately 250 events, forums, and public statement hearings, and distributed more than 1.5 million pieces of bilingual educational materials. Also, the Commission's www.AskPSC.com Web site received over 3.75 million hits. Commission staff also conducts an active public involvement program as part of Commission cases and proceedings so that consumer input can be considered and incorporated into Commission decisions and programs. In 2009, the public involvement initiatives included

public statement hearings and education forums for utility rate cases, Article VII transmission lines, area code restructuring plans, and the federal economic stimulus fund.

Commission staff works with 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. Commission staff also works closely with the state's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the New York State Consumer Protection Board and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority to educate customers about a range of issues and programs available related to energy and communications services. Additionally, Commission staff works with the state's major energy 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.

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, obtain information, or attend an informational event conducted by the Department, may visit the Commission's www.AskPSC.com Web site.