

New Hampshire woman dies after electricity cutoff

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A woman in southern New Hampshire died Thursday following the cutoff of electricity to her home by the private utility company National Grid. Kay Phaneuf, 53, who suffered from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), relied on an oxygen machine plugged into the electrical power.

Last Monday at 9 a.m., a National Grid worker showed up at the Phaneuf home at 18 Charles Street in Salem, New Hampshire. A red sign on the door read, “No smoking, oxygen in use.” After knocking on the door and ringing the bell, and receiving no response, the worker cut off the electricity and left.

Kay Phaneuf’s husband, Stephen Phaneuf, returned home just before 10:00 a.m. to find his wife unconscious and without a pulse, apparently having suffered cardiac arrest. He called 911 and Salem fire personnel arrived two minutes later. They performed CPR, and she was resuscitated and rushed to Holy Family Hospital in nearby Methuen, Massachusetts, where she grew up.

Kay Phaneuf remained at Holy Family Hospital in critical condition until she died on Thursday. In addition to her husband, she leaves behind two adult daughters and a grandchild. She was also a cancer survivor.

Janet DeLoge told the *Globe*, “She has been on oxygen a couple of years because of the COPD, and she uses a portable tank as a backup and for when she goes out. She sleeps with an oxygen tent around her bed.”

It is not clear whether the oxygen machine’s backup unit was in working order at the time. The machine also should have set off an alarm when the power was cut, but it is unknown whether it sounded, or if the victim may have slept through it.

According to Fire Marshall Jeffrey Emanuelson, the Salem Fire Department has been called to the home on

Charles Street on four occasions over the last two years, all for medical issues, most recently in December 2009.

Salem Police Captain Shawn Patten defended the company, telling the *Eagle-Tribune* (North Andover, Mass.), “It appears, at this point, National Grid followed all of its protocols. From our perspective it appears to have been an avoidable tragedy. We have yet to determine if it rises to the point of a criminal matter. We will be consulting with the attorney general’s office.”

New Hampshire state law requires people with medical issues to be protected from power shutoffs. While the Phaneufs’ National Grid account had been marked with this medical status, the utility says that the status had expired on May 15. David Graves, a spokesman for the utility, contends that the family had been sent two notifications that the medical status had expired, but “there was no response.”

Graves told the *Boston Globe* that the National Grid worker “had no record to indicate there was a medical note on the account.” He added, “We follow the state regulations to protect the customer and to protect the company as well. The last thing that we want to do is cut off a person’s service.” But this is precisely what happened, with deadly results.

National Grid has yet to provide an explanation of why—if the account had been protected for a number of years from cutoff due to Kay Phaneuf’s medical status—there was no investigation when the family failed to respond to the utility’s letters. They have also not explained why the worker sent to the home to cut off the electricity had no knowledge of this status.

In the wake of the tragedy, New Hampshire Governor John Lynch, a Democrat, has called for a comprehensive review by the state Public Utility Commission (PUC). In a letter to the commission,

Lynch wrote, “This review should include an assessment of the adequacy of policies and safeguards related to power shutoffs, and a determination of whether those policies are being rigorously adhered to by New Hampshire’s utility companies.”

However, under conditions where electrical power and other utilities are controlled by for-profit, private companies, government authorities wield little control over their operations. National Grid provides gas and electricity in the Northeast of the US as well as in Britain. The company ranked 333 on Fortune’s Global 500 list for 2009, with \$1.6 billion in profits and more than 27,000 employees.



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