

Detroiters speak out on DTE's phony "customer assistance"

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In the weeks after DTE Energy's December Customer Assistance Day, members of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs spoke to several Detroiters who had sought assistance. Far from being "assisted", these Detroiters faced a perpetual run-around, lies, misinformation and arrogance.

As the company indicated when posting their record \$630 million in profits, "customer assistance forums" are not actually designed to assist residents, but to "manage the level of past due receivables" owed to DTE (See "DTE Energy 2010 profits soar as utility shutoffs increase").

"I sought help on behalf of my 83-year-old mother who has to pay all of her expenses out of her Social Security check," Lanette told CAUS.

"I have gone to so many organizations. In 2010 I went from church to church trying to get help, even before I heard about [DTE's] Cobo Hall Customer Assistance Day.

"I went to Mount Zion church, and the DTE worker told me they would let my mother stay on the budget plan and they would help with the bill. But they did nothing; I got no help. Then I went to New Greater Zion Hill Baptist Church in November. You go there and you wait and wait for hours and then people talk to you about how you can weatherize your house and fix it up. They show you how to read your gas and lights bill to see your usage. You get a certificate and they told me THAW was going to pay my mother's bill because I had attended the class. I came home and told her and we were so happy.

"Near where we live, at Harper and Gratiot, the THAW people have an office at a neighborhood community services center. I went there with the certificate but the

DTE worker told me they had no money left for THAW.

"When I went to Cobo Hall and walked around to different programs and I saw THAW I told them, well you are just the people I am looking for! The representative told me THAW did have money and to just keep trying. So I went back to the office at Harper and Gratiot and they told me again there was no money and the program will not start back until next fall.

"So what they told me about THAW at Cobo turned out not to be true. There were so many promises in these fliers they sent about these forums and then they don't do anything. Their letters all say things like this, and let me read you one: 'Are you having trouble paying your energy bill? DTE Energy can help.'

"I also have my daughter's kids aged 2 and 4. The youngest is still in diapers. Even though I have legal guardianship my request for help from the state for the children was denied. So I am caring for three people, even though I have a condition that has made it impossible to work for the last four years.

"The boy's weight is very low due to an illness. He is supposed to have 96 bottles of PediaSure a month. Each of these bottles costs four dollars and I have to struggle to pay for the whole amount. It is really difficult to make a monthly budget with the state's new policy of delaying the date you get food stamps, especially since that is all I get. I am sure there are other people in this same situation.

"DTE sent us a shutoff notice for just a few hundred dollars owed. And if you are just a few days late, they will cut you off. I tried to explain to DTE that they should let us pay based on when we get our monthly checks, but they will not listen.

“They are supposed to be helping, but they did not help. They just fooled me. Every one I talk to now just says in response to my telling them about the workers’ earlier promises, ‘there is nothing we can do.’ And then what really did it for me is that they did not even give me the \$25 credit they promised.

“I think it is a disgrace that people are being put through this. There are so many people dying, little kids getting burned up and such, it is a disgrace. What I have realized is that there are more people struggling to pay their bills than those who can pay. I think DTE should be at fault for people being killed, like those two old men killed [a January 2010 fire caused by a DTE shutoff killed Myron and Tyrone Allen]. If the service had not been off, they would not have had to do that to try to get warm that way and would not have been killed.”

Edward also related his experiences to CAUS. “I had to move in with my mother because the home I bought in Southwest Detroit has had no gas and electricity for many months. I have only a small disability pension and care for two grandchildren, who are allotted about \$275 a month from the state for both of them.

“They turned off my gas utilities because they said I owed \$4,000 but when I went down to pay they demanded \$5,000. I have a receipt showing I gave them that money. Then after I gave them all that money and I called to get the utilities turned on they told me that I owe another \$15,000.

“It doesn’t make any sense. There is something really wrong here. Every time I ask they tell me they really didn’t know what happened. When somebody owes over a thousand dollars they automatically come out and cut the gas off, so how could I possibly owe that much?

“As far as getting help from the state, that is not very likely. One time they paid \$370 but they are not going to pay the \$15,000 that DTE is demanding. There is no way on the little check that I get from Social Security than I can ever pay that amount.

“I got no help at the DTE energy day. In fact it seems like every time I talk to them they tack another charge onto the bill.”

Lackita had a similar experience. “They did nothing for me when I went to Cobo Hall. My utilities are still shut off. I can’t get any help and they simply will not work with me.

“It all started when two years ago I was shot and had to spend three months in the hospital. When I finally got out of the hospital, DTE claimed that I had this back bill and said I could not have utilities back on until I paid it. What makes it worse is that they have all these extra charges that they tack on to make it impossible to ever pay. I went to the Department of Human Services to file something called an SER. That is a State Emergency Relief petition. But they said they would not help me because the utilities are already shut off.

“Finally they came out and dug up the gas line in the front yard and actually charged me \$1,200 for the service call! Now with the cold I have to worry about my pipes bursting. I own a home and, yes, it is a nice neighborhood. I love my street. Yet myself and my children have to double-up and live with other people because of DTE.”

The predicament of the families we interviewed and others, whose desperation leads them to attend these events, will only worsen as federal, state, and local assistance is slashed. For example, the State Emergency Relief fund (SER) receives funding for utility assistance from the federal government through LIHEAP (Low Income Heating and Energy Assistance Fund). Obama’s fiscal year 2012 budget slashes LIHEAP in half.



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