

Pennsylvania residents go days without power after ice storm

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Hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvania households went several days without power in below-freezing weather after an ice storm damaged the state's power grid on February 4. As of February 11, 18,000 separate consumers, most of them in the greater Philadelphia area, remained without power as a result of a storm whose damage has been compared to Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

At one point, more than 700,000 people had no electricity. Two days later, 250,000 households remained without power. On Wednesday, February 12, the ninth day after the storm hit, officials from PECO, the private utility company servicing the region, claimed that power was being restored to that last of its customers without electricity.

The 18,000 utility customers who remained without power for eight days were concentrated in the five-county Philadelphia area (Chester, Bucks, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia), with nearly 10,000 in decimated Chester County. Yesterday, Montgomery County and Bucks County had more than 4,300 and 2,700, respectively, and Delaware County had more than 1,300 homes without electricity.

Those able to afford or permitted to utilize a generator have turned them on. Some, like Dave Dixon and his wife, whose home went dark early morning last Wednesday, have stayed with neighbors. "If we wear out our welcome," he said, "we'll get a hotel." Another victim, Bro Copper, was finally compelled to call 911 to find a suitable shelter after his Coatesville apartment had been without electricity for several days.

Stacie Testerman, a York County resident, was still without power as of Monday. She also lost access to water as it is delivered to her house by a pump from a well. With nowhere to go, she had to burn wood in the stove and melt snow to make water for flushing the

toilet. "We have chickens, cats, and a hotel costs money," she told the *Los Angeles Times*. "We thought maybe a day without power. This is excessive."

In hard-hit Chester County, Kelly Whalen and her family thought they could manage to stay at home without power. The extreme cold forced her and her husband to sleep by the fireplace, and her four children had to wear double layers of clothing and use extra blankets. "It got down to 45 degrees in the house by the time we woke up Thursday morning," Whalen said. "That's too much." The family, as a result, drove two hours south to stay with relatives living on the east coast of Delaware.

Hospitals have reported carbon monoxide poisonings. Without electricity for a lengthy period, coupled with freezing temperatures during the day and at night, some have used generators inside or charcoal and gas grills in their homes.

Other distressed families sought shelter in public libraries, shopping malls, and makeshift shelters. According to the American Red Cross of Southeastern Pennsylvania, around 200 people went to seven shelters in three suburban Philadelphia counties, with more people entering shelters in central Pennsylvania as well.

Emergency crews from as far away as Canada and the Deep South have been contacted to aid in the disaster. PECO has said the storm ranks as the largest winter power outage in its history, second only to Hurricane Sandy, which destroyed large parts of the East Coast in 2012. PECO is the principal electricity provider in the Philadelphia area and had the most power outages—394,000. It has been extremely sluggish in getting power restored.

The Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission (PUC) opened an investigation into the response of PECO to the widespread outages. PUC spokesperson Jennifer

Kocher described the inquiry as “standard procedure,” saying it could take anywhere from six months to a year to complete.

Kocher added, “We look at how much equipment they had, how many people they had responding, how the companies communicated with consumers and whether they provided them with adequate information. We look at every aspect of it, and we look at the damages; and all of that goes into making a determination about how things could possibly improve.”

PUC added that that they do not have the authority to grant any credits or reimbursements to customers and advised those with outage-related damages to contact their insurance companies.

According to a statement from Pennsylvania state officials, the damage by the ice storm is more serious than that caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Glenn Cannon, director of the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, claimed that in contrast to Sandy, there are now “many more spot repairs” to downed wires, which feed power to fewer homes and buildings.

Some residents still without power have shared their outrage against PECO through social media at the utility company. One person sent a tweet: “1969 American Lands on the moon. 2014: #PECO incapable of restoring electricity for thousands of customers for almost a week.” “97 hours with no power.” Another frustrated person wrote, “We’ve been using a generator and I’ve been positive until now, but I’m at my breaking point. Come on...”



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