

One week since gas explosions in Merrimack Valley

## More than 85,000 Massachusetts residents could be without gas service for months

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Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker and Columbia Gas executives have told residents in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover that they could be without gas to heat their homes until November 19, more than two months after a series of gas explosions and fires rocked the Merrimack Valley communities.

On September 13, natural gas explosions and fires destroyed or damaged more than 60 homes in the area, injuring more than 25 unsuspecting residents and killing a young man. The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the cause of the explosions. According to a preliminary review, gas was introduced into the community's pipes at 12 times the normal pressure.

At a press conference on Friday, Baker said the goal is to restore full gas service to 8,527 affected customers in the “next few weeks.” But he went on to say that the process may not be complete until November 19. In the meantime, households and small businesses will be without gas for heat, hot water and to cook.

Using his authority under a state of emergency he declared in the wake of the explosions, Baker has tapped a “reconstruction czar.” Captain Joseph Albanese, a retired Navy Seabee, has been hired by Columbia Gas to oversee the process of upgrading 48 miles of pipeline in the three communities. Safety experts have questioned whether this fast-track effort—after years of neglect of aging pipes—can be accomplished safely.

Columbia executives said the Massachusetts National Guard was being activated to distribute 7,000 hotplates and 24,000 space heaters to affected residents beginning this weekend. Portable shower units have been set up and the local YMCA has made its showers

available to area residents.

Events in the week since the disaster have demonstrated the arrogance of Columbia Gas, the company that profits from distributing the fuel. As with other utility giants across the US, Columbia has refused to make needed upgrades to the gas pipes, which they claim would be an unacceptable drain on their bottom line.

A day after the September 13 events that caused widespread destruction, the president of Columbia Gas of Massachusetts, Steve Bryant, callously stated that he was “deeply concerned about the inconvenience.” Communication from the company about a crisis it created was nearly nonexistent until Bryant's remarks.

Joe Hamrock, chief executive of parent company NiSource, told the press on Sunday that “we know this has damaged the confidence and trust in our company and what we do. Our full commitment is restoring that trust ...” In Hamrock's mouth, the words “restoring trust” mean not losing customers to his capitalist competitors, Eversource and National Grid.

Columbia Gas added insult to injury last weekend by handing out gift cards in \$50 and \$100 denominations to people who waited for hours to file claims after their homes were destroyed and lives upended. Because the company's claim center did not have enough capacity, many were told they had to come back the following day. State Police were deployed outside of at least one claim center because of growing anger.

NiSource's most recent quarterly dividend was 19.5 cents per common share, or about 3 percent of the cost of a share. With 363 million common shares outstanding, the company pays total dividends on them of \$70.8 million every three months and a yearly

dividend of nearly \$60 on preferred stock. Its yearly revenue approaches \$5 billion.

Until canceling a new rate hike this week as a public relations move, Columbia Gas planned to charge customers nearly \$20 million of the cost for upgrading old pipes.

On Tuesday the company announced a \$10 million contribution to a 501(c)3 foundation set up by Baker for those suffering from the disaster. If this amount were spread evenly among the more than 8,500 households that must live under appalling conditions for weeks on end, each would get less than \$1,200.

Local media has begun to document the impact of the disaster on local bodegas, restaurants, laundromats, and day care centers, especially in the working-class city of Lawrence. The *Boston Globe* profiled Rosely Paulino, who still has no gas for cooking or hot water for the day care center she runs out of her home in South Lawrence.

Electricity was shut off to thousands of gas-filled buildings in Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover in the aftermath of the disaster so that new fires wouldn't start. The value of ruined food is likely in the millions of dollars. The owner of two bodegas estimated that the spoiled produce, meat, and fish he had to throw away were worth \$30,000, according to the *Globe*.

On Wednesday, 300 people attended the funeral service for Leonel Rondon of Lawrence, an 18-year-old high school student who was killed when gas blew up a home and caused its chimney to fall on his car. Rondon was celebrating with friends after having received his first driver's license, and the celebration was to include a meal at the house which exploded.

On Thursday the *Lawrence Eagle-Tribune* profiled a family whose house was destroyed by fire. Suffering from terminal cancer, the 63-year-old mother of the family had wanted to die at home rather than in a facility. One of her daughters, who was visiting from out-of-state when the fire happened, described the tragic impact: "The only control she had left over her life, which was to choose to die at home, was now burning away. That was the only decision she really had left to make in this world."

Lawrence is not the only working-class city in Massachusetts in which Columbia Gas subjects people to the risk of such conditions. Brockton, a city of 95,000, is riddled with old cast iron and steel pipes

similar to those in the Merrimack Valley. Brockton has a median household income under 40,000 and nearly 20 percent of its residents under the age of 18 live below the federal poverty line.

National Grid and Eversource, Columbia Gas's competitors in the natural gas distribution business, are engaged in their own ruthless drives for profit. Approximately 1,200 skilled National Grid workers have been locked out since late June after refusing to accept cuts to their pensions and medical benefits.

According to a study by the Environmental Defense Fund, Eversource regularly reserves large amounts of natural gas in advance for the generation of electricity, but then uses much less on the day stipulated in the contract. Especially on cold winter days, the unused gas is then sold to consumers at higher prices because suppliers need to recoup their losses. The EDF estimates that customers in New England are paying an extra \$1.2 billion per year because of this price fixing.

After a 2013 report calculated how many trillions of cubic feet of gas had been lost into the atmosphere across the US because of leaking pipes, Massachusetts passed a law requiring companies to report the age and location of all known leaks. Eversource subsequently promised an infrastructure maintenance program that would take 25 years to complete, while National Grid promised to have theirs done in 20. Chapter 164 of the Massachusetts General Laws allows utilities to include infrastructure costs in the rates they charge to customers.

While Governor Baker has sought to quell public anger about the September 13 crisis, underfunding of the state's Department of Public Utilities will increase the likelihood of more such events. Over the last three fiscal years, the DPU's budget has been increased by an average of just 1.25 percent per year.



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