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WAPA Forbidden From Disconnecting Customers Whose Bills it is Estimating, PSC Commissioners Remind

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The Public Services Commissioner during a Wednesday meeting said the V.I. Water and Power Authority cannot disconnect residents whose electric bills it is estimating.

That's according to PSC Chairman and Commissioner David Hughes, speaking during a portion of the hearing where a number of WAPA issues were discussed, including the Levelized Energy Adjustment Clause (LEAC), WAPA's [base rate increase request](#), and customer service issues among other matters related to the territory's only utility. Mr. Hughes sought to remind the authority of the PSC order, which he said was not being uniformly honored by WAPA.

Mr. Hughes reminded WAPA representatives of the order during discussions arising from the overflow of complaints the PSC said it has been receiving from ratepayers regarding exorbitant electric bills from estimated meter readings. Ratepayers are supposed to first bring the discrepancy to WAPA, which in turn is supposed to help. However, ratepayers have found little success with the authority in their attempts to rectify inconsistent billing, and therefore take the matter up to the PSC.

"I believe that WAPA needs to understand that they have created this problem, and when ratepayers are coming in seeking redress, WAPA is sticking to the position that the meter said this and that's it," said PSC Executive Director Donald Cole. "And they know that the collectors aren't working — they know what's happening — and it's creating very serious problems in terms of dealing with these issues."

Following Mr. Cole's comments, Mr. Hughes reminded the authority's representatives, including Interim Executive Director Noel Hodge, of the PSC order that prohibits WAPA from cutting off power to customers whose bills it estimates.

"I would like to make you aware that the Public Services Commission order that says you may not disconnect a customer for whom you're estimating a bill," Mr. Hughes said during the Wednesday meeting. "That order has not been uniformly honored by the authority over the last year or so. We see so many complaints from people who have estimated billing who are being threatened with disconnection. I would like to make you aware that there's an order that precludes you from doing so."

Mr. Hughes added, "In this new environment we simply will not allow it, so I hope it leads to a different type of conversation with customers service, and these matters are within your purview until they're not and I hope that we take a different approach to the customer given what we know about our own deficiency in the data system."

The order also prohibits WAPA from threatening disconnection, Mr. Hughes said, "with the idea that if you're not providing an accurate bill to the customer, you cannot disconnect them. So if you're estimating a bill you may not disconnect the customer until you resolve the estimation first in a rationale, measured bill that has been read by somebody."

During the meeting, a question arose regarding whether WAPA was reflecting on bills sent to customers that those charges were based on estimated consumption. A WAPA representative said the authority has been including that information on the bills, though some PSC commissioners questioned whether the application was being universally adhered to based on customer complaints.

"If think it's possible that that's not uniformly true, although most of the complaints that we've been receiving due to estimated billing do, in fact, note that the bills are estimated, so this would be progress," Mr. Hughes said.