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Testimony of Senator Toni Boucher Regarding the Response to Tropical Storm Irene

Distinguished Chairs, Ranking Members and other members of the Labor, Public Safety, Planning and Development and Energy and Technology Committees, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the response to Tropical Storm Irene.

In many ways, Connecticut's response to Irene was strong. The line crews were hailed as the stars of the operation once they arrived, and did a phenomenal job. Our towns were also praised for their skill in responding to residents' concerns and in commodity distribution. Nevertheless, communications issues between town, state agencies and public utilities made the restoration process slower than it might otherwise have been. A lack of accurate information between public utilities and towns created uncertainty about when schools would reopen, and whether alternative arrangements should be made for the sick in their homes. Additionally, there was general public outcry when a rate increase was announced in the aftermath of the storm. This was an unfortunate communication gaffe that added to the public's anger.

This storm demonstrated the need for improvement in response and restoration plans by public utilities, as well as in some state agencies. There are also areas of emergency management that the legislature may want to address. I would like to share some of the recommendations that have been offered by first responders and ratepayers in my seven towns that were some of the most severely affected, in the hope that we can strengthen our future ability to respond to emergency situations.

Notes Regarding Irene Response and Restoration Efforts

Public Utility Issues

Communications Problems w/ Public Utility Company

- Lack of communication and coordination between public utility management and crews hampered restoration efforts. Better coordination is also needed between management and out of state crews.
- There needs to be better communication between public utilities and police and fire departments and a plan in place to make use of outside resources.
- There was a systematic communication failure between public utilities , town officials and residents.
- Storm preparations and planning should be centralized, but implementation and response should be decentralized. Public utility liaisons did not have any training or authority to take action. In the future an operations person and an information person from public utilities should be assigned to each town.
- Public utility liaisons sent to each town need to be given the authority to direct, control and command the work crews on the ground to address priority areas in real time.
- There needs to be honest communication between public utilities and town officials to better manage residents' expectations and make necessary decisions. If utilities know that the power will be out for x amount of days, the towns have to know so that they can decide when to open schools and when patients in healthcare facilities need to make alternative arrangements.
- Real Time Communications need to be created- modeled on Fed EX or UPS systems.

Other Issues:

- Though there seemed to be a plan in place ahead of time, there was a sense that utilities did not take action until day three. This delay is a key problem. Once they arrived the line crews were excellent; people had power back in three or four days after the delay.
- Public utility line crews are only half of what they were 20 years ago.
- Ridgefield obtained only 30 crews, most of which were tree crews. This was not enough.
- Utilities should recognize houses that are on septic systems and well water- hygiene and health programs after 3-4 days. Some homes had vulnerable populations- the elderly and sick.
- It took too long for utilities to come to towns to turn off the power so that trees could be removed.
- Concerns that labor and cost issues slowed public utilities' response. Management would not authorize overtime.
- In cases of extreme emergency a plan should be in place to certify of local tree experts, electricians, water companies and pool companies.
- Public utilities need to have a better plan for tree management.
- What is the cost benefit analysis of underground wires and smart meters and what is the process for calling on out of state assistance and when should out of state crews be brought in?

Town Issues

- Overall towns did fairly well, though local officials could be more honest with the public in managing their expectations.

- Operations representatives and better trained public relations officers from public utilities could make restoration efforts more effective and relieve some of the stress on towns. Towns recommend deploying these resources in each municipality immediately after the storm is over
- Officials need to avoid overreacting and work more closely with local and state officials. Social media should be more extensively used, such as Facebook and Twitter. Radio and flyers should also be used. Updates should contain information like where residents can get water and where the town shelter is located
- School superintendents, public works and town officials should all work together to make decision on school openings.
- Reverse 911 should be used to notify residents of important updates and keep them informed.
- All towns should have a grid map at town hall.
- Towns need a better plan for tree clearing
- Emergency notifications from police and town officials could be sent out by text message in addition to email.

State of CT Issues, DHMAS, CT DOT

- CT DOT did not take action until day 2. They plowed roadways even where there were downed wires and then left and never came back. Local municipalities ended up cleaning both local and state roads to allow emergency vehicles through. Question of whether towns can be reimbursed for this.
- CT DOT should have a tree management system in place and a tree clearing plan ahead of time.
- DHMAS responsible for commodity distribution system, which failed. Towns were expected to come to East Hartford for supplies when commodities should have been delivered by the state. The towns rented their own trailer, but had to wait 12 hours before it was filled. Later asked to pick up commodities in Oxford
- State needs better command and control of their assets and the ability to dispatch them. The National Guard performed well where deployed, but lack of coordination meant they were not evenly deployed.
- Utilities, phone companies and cable companies need to be included in a statewide disaster, response and restoration plan.

Legislative Issues

- Utilities should be included in all state and federal emergency plans.
- Legislature should address what the rights of ratepayers are.
- Storm response should be coordinated at the state and local level along with power, phone and cable companies.
- The legislature should mandate a response and restoration plan