

Washington Gas leaves customers on hold for hours, cites call center contractor

The utility laid blame for the customer-service delays on the pandemic and what it said were problems with a Virginia contractor

By [Michael Laris](#)

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A months-long customer service meltdown at Washington Gas has captured the attention of regulators and has infuriated customers, some of whom have remained on hold for more than three hours as they seek to have service turned on or off with the utility.

“I have been in some terrible hold situations, but never anything like this,” said Pat Dennis, who estimates he spent 15 hours on hold over five days filled with cold showers last month while seeking gas at his Mount Rainier home after a move from Capitol Hill. “If this was anything but hot water, I would have just put it off or purchased some alternative.”

Tony Bullock, who served as press secretary for former D.C. mayor Anthony Williams, said he gave up trying to correct a company billing error after a comparatively modest hour and 34 minutes on hold in April. His usual bill of about \$100 had spiked to more than \$300, even though he said he and Tyler, his Bichon Frise dog, had not upped their usage.

“There was just zero ability to penetrate the utility,” Bullock said. “I just thought that was ridiculous.”

The utility laid blame for the customer-service delays on the coronavirus pandemic and what it said were problems with a Virginia call-center contractor, though it declined to name the contractor or provide other details. The delays have triggered responses from utility regulators and advocates for customers, while prompting the company to temporarily halt service shut-offs as it transitions to a new contractor.

Washington Gas has more than 1.2 million residential, commercial and industrial customers in the District, Maryland and Virginia. The utility said it wouldn't release information showing how many customers have been affected, but acknowledged that customers have encountered waits of “multiple hours” trying to contact the company.

“Washington Gas apologizes to our customers who continue to have difficulty reaching our Call Center over the last few months,” the company said in a statement. “We know that we have not met our customers' expectations or our own high standards of service.”

Officials with the District's Office of the People's Counsel, a government agency that advocates for utility customers, said it raised the issue in May of customers being unable to reach Washington Gas customer service.

“We were told the company was working on a solution that would be implemented soon,” People's Counsel Sandra Mattavous-Frye wrote to the company in a Sept. 3 letter. “Months have passed since that time and the issue still exists.”

In fact, according to the District agency, the problem has worsened.

“One of the initial callers said they had to wait 45 minutes. I just thought to myself, ‘That’s unacceptable.’ Now we’re at three hours. I got two or three emails yesterday that said the people stayed on the telephone for three hours and they didn’t get anybody,” said Aaron Ward, director of consumer services at the Office of the People’s Counsel. “They’re not meeting the basic requirement of consumers being able to contact them.”

Ward’s counterparts at Maryland’s Office of People’s Counsel said they have seen cases in the past week in which customers had service disconnected after failing to pay bills. But after they made a payment, customers could not reach Washington Gas representatives to get gas turned back on, said Brandi Nieland, director of consumer assistance at the Maryland People’s Counsel office.

Tori Leonard, communications director for the Maryland Public Service Commission, which regulates Washington Gas and other utilities in the state, said regulators are aware of delays in resuming service under such circumstances. “That’s a serious matter,” she said.

In a statement to The Washington Post, Washington Gas said it has paused residential disconnections in Maryland and Virginia until the end of the month when it will reassess the situation. In the District, a moratorium on pursuing such disconnections remains in place until next month.

The company said significant improvements would come soon, mirroring a pledge made to local officials months ago. Washington Gas spokesman Brian Edwards said the company has hired a new call center contractor, a process he said the company has sped up.

“Normally it takes a year to select and transition to a new provider,” he said. “We were able to do that process in six months.”

Washington Gas’s past assurances that improvements were on the way came in the context of efforts to work with the original provider, Edwards said. Those efforts were ultimately unsuccessful.

The previous contractor had been “significantly impacted by the pandemic,” Edwards said. “I can’t go into the details of how the call center provider was doing its staffing. ... The bottom line is we didn’t have sufficient numbers to meet the standards that we need to deliver the level of service we expect.”

Complaints to Virginia regulators have grown to about 50 each day, said Ken Schrad, a spokesman for the State Corporation Commission.

“We expect the utility company, regardless of whoever they’re using to handle [the call center], to be able to be responsive to their customers,” he said.

Washington Gas said it is working on a “virtual hold” feature — a system that would call customers back rather than having them stay on the line — while also developing online chat functionality. It said hundreds of customers use the website to start and stop service daily, although some tasks require speaking with an agent — though some customers have reported experiencing online technical problems.

Edwards declined to offer a target for how much time is too long for a customer to wait, but said service “will be improved over the next few weeks and few months.”

District regulators said they plan to examine problems that customers are facing as they try to reach Washington Gas.

Acknowledging the frustration of one customer, the District’s Public Service Commission tweeted Sept. 2. “you’re not

...regarding the frustration of our customers, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) stated, "You're not alone in experiencing those issues." The commission said details and dates were still being finalized, but they are "scheduling a technical conference that'll address [the company's] performance in achieving customer service standards."



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