

Westmoreland electrocution records released

A suit contends it took a utility 2 minutes, 27 seconds to answer a 911 call about a fallen wire.

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW



Carrie Goretzka, husband Michael, daughters Chloe, 4, and Carlie, 2.

By Paul Peirce

As a young Hempfield mother lay on the ground June 2 with 7,200 volts of electricity coursing through her body in view of her two preschoolers, a Westmoreland 911 dispatcher frantically tried to contact Allegheny Power.

A teenage neighbor who called 911 and the dispatcher waited as the emergency phone rang unanswered.

A minute passed. Then another.

Recordings indicate it took 20 rings — spanning two minutes, 27 seconds — before an Allegheny Power employee answered the call.

The 911 dispatcher, identified in transcripts as Debbie Blair, says twice: "Allegheny Power is not answering."

Attorney Shanin Specter of Philadelphia has filed a civil lawsuit in Allegheny County over the electrocution of Carrie Goretzka, 39. She died after being trapped under a fallen power line outside her West Hempfield Drive home as her mother-in-law and two daughters, Chloe, 4, and Carlie, 2, helplessly watched.

Goretzka, who had burns over 85 percent of her body, died three days later in UPMC Mercy, Pittsburgh.

Specter provided the Tribune-Review audio tapes and transcripts of the frantic phone calls neighbors made to 911, plus attempts by Blair to reach Allegheny Power to shut off the power so rescue crews could pull Goretzka from beneath the line.

Allegheny Energy spokesman David Neurohr said the company would not comment on specifics regarding the calls because of the pending litigation.

However, Neurohr said, "Every 911 center, in every region we serve, has a dedicated telephone number to call for service in the event of an emergency" and a separate dedicated fax number to report emergencies.

"Two minutes sounds like a long time," said Scott Hempling, director of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners, which comprises commissioners from utility regulatory bodies in each state.

Goretzka became trapped under the line when she went outside her home to check on the cause of a power outage, according to the 23-page lawsuit filed on behalf of Goretzka's husband, Michael. Goretzka saw flames coming from the line and went into the garage to get her cell phone to dial 911. She walked into a side yard to make the call when the line fell on her, the lawsuit said.

"Although there were no adverse weather conditions ... the 7,200-volt power line fell from the pole in her yard nearest to West Hempfield Drive, striking Mrs. Goretzka and knocking her to the ground. Mrs. Goretzka was shocked continuously and caught on fire," the lawsuit states.

It alleges Allegheny Power "failed to use reasonable and proper care in installing and maintaining a power line so it would not fall to the ground."

In taped conversation between Blair and an unidentified Allegheny Power employee, the dispatcher tells the worker to get a crew to the site "ASAP" because she (Goretzka) is "wrapped up in a high-tension wire ... and she's literally smoking and burning."

"Oh, my!" the worker says, before repeating Goretzka's address.

Westmoreland County Department of Public Safety officials said they do not plan to review their procedures in the wake of Goretzka's death.

The state Public Utility Commission is reviewing the circumstances involved in Goretzka's death.

A shock greater than the electric chair

Specter also is representing JoAnn Goretzka of Elizabeth, who was shocked when she came within 3 feet of the line as she tried to save her daughter-in-law. He said the utility should have a dedicated line into 911 that is "picked up as soon as it rings."

"Obviously, she would have suffered much less if they had answered the phone, as they should, because the amount of time she was receiving thousands of volts of electricity and was writhing in pain, smoking and on fire from the electricity would have been lessened," Specter said.

During the delay, Goretzka was subjected to a higher level of electricity than Pennsylvania's electric chair, which zapped the condemned with 2,000 volts. It was last used in 1963, after courts ruled it was cruel and unusual punishment.

Dr. Daniel O. Hensell, a critical care surgeon and associate professor at Temple University Hospital's burn center in Philadelphia, said he has treated patients who have survived an electrical injury at 7,200 volts.

"We've had some cases where someone with that type of shock has survived, but their injuries would be very, very bad. The person would never be the same," Hensell said.

He said the severity of such an injury is affected by various factors, such as the amount of current, the length of contact and the path it takes through the victim's body. At such a high voltage, a victim does not even have to come into direct contact with the line.

"It can actually leap to your body if you come too close," Hensell said.

Victims rarely remember the incidents.

"First, as they begin treatment they are usually kept intubated. When they are able to speak again, they do not remember," Hensell said.

"There are usually major thermal injuries, depending on what they were touching," he said. "With that kind of voltage, they would probably lose one or more limbs."

Jennifer Kocher, spokeswoman for the state Public Utility Commission, said there are no laws governing response times by utilities except when it comes to restoration of service. The commission does not monitor response rates to emergency hot lines.

"Any time there is an emergency with a utility, especially with electricity or natural gas, we encourage them to respond as quickly as possible," Kocher said. "We are reviewing that particular call and are looking at the overall handling, as well as investigating the maintenance of the lines."

But, she added, turning off the current "could be more complicated than flipping a switch."

Utilities are required to immediately notify the PUC in the event of an accident or death, and must follow up with a written report.

Neither the PUC nor the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency tracks response times of utilities or emergency services units.

"Really, there was no delay from our point," said Sandy Smythe, Westmoreland emergency management's deputy public information officer. "The system worked as planned."

Dan Stevens, public information officer with 911, said under normal circumstances dispatchers "strictly fax" notification.

"But this case was so urgent, our dispatcher went the extra mile trying to use a call-line program into our system and, when that wasn't answering, used the same 1-800 Allegheny number the public uses (during emergencies)," Stevens said.

On the recording, Blair is heard asking for a "slip." Smythe said, the form used to fax the utility about the emergency.

"We have in place a redundant system to protect against any delay. We automatically fax pertinent information to the utility on the slip, as you heard, and that is automatically done," Smythe said.