

The Goretzka Case

Allegheny Energy sued over Irwin woman's death

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Lawyer wants PUC probe of power lines after death

PITTSBURGH (AP) - The attorney for the family of a western Pennsylvania woman killed by a downed power line wants the state Public Utility Commission to investigate how a utility's workers were allegedly instructed to clean spliced power lines to keep them from overheating and failing.

Attorney Shanin Specter is suing West Penn Power and related entities, claiming he's taken sworn depositions from maintenance workers who said they were trained to clean power lines with knives and other tools instead of wire brushes which - the attorney and the power line's manufacturer contend - is the only way to keep the lines from failing.

Specter took the depositions in a lawsuit filed in the June 2009 death of Carrie Goretzka, who was badly burned when a power line fell in her yard in Irwin, about 25 miles east of Pittsburgh.

The problem "may cause additional lines to fall and people to die," Specter said in his letter to the PUC. "This must be remedied."

PUC spokeswoman Jennifer Kocher told The Associated Press on Tuesday that the agency received the letter last week and has begun an investigation, which she said is "in its infancy at this point."

Kocher said people can file formal complaints to the commission, but if that occurs, only the utility in question and the specific incident are investigated. Specter's letter, sent directly to the five-member commission, has been referred to the PUC's internal Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement and its Law Bureau, which are empowered to look into the problem more broadly.

"A formal complaint would be limited to the company against which they are complaining," Kocher said. "But this particular avenue to the Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement allows us to take a statewide look at the problem."

Specter's lawsuit, filed on behalf of Goretzka's husband, Michael, and the couple's two children, contends Allegheny Energy workers failed to properly clean power lines that were spliced above their yard and eventually failed on June 2, 2009, cutting power to the home.

Carrie Goretzka, 39, went outside with a cellphone to call 911 when the line fell onto her, where she was shocked and burned in front of her daughters and mother-in-law. Goretzka's mother-in-law was shocked trying to help her, and Goretzka couldn't be helped or moved until utility workers arrived to turn off the power, Specter said. Goretzka suffered burns over 85% of her body and had her left arm amputated before she died three days later.

Specter is suing Allegheny Energy Inc., Allegheny Power and West Penn Power. Allegheny Power was an Allegheny Energy subsidiary renamed West Penn Power when Allegheny Energy and Akron, Ohio-based FirstEnergy Corp. merged last year.

"While our sympathy certainly goes out to Carrie Goretzka's family, we cannot comment due to the ongoing litigation," West Penn Power said in a statement.

Specter contends the line failed where it was spliced by a device manufactured by Hubbell Power Systems, Inc., which was neither sued nor accused of wrongdoing. Specter said workers who used the splice device are instructed to clean the wires with a wire brush and even Allegheny Power's written safety instruction say workers should "clean completely through oxides. Unclean conductor (power line) will set up overheating and eventually cause failure of the splice," Specter said in the letter.

Despite that, Specter said several workers gave sworn depositions saying they were trained to clean spliced power lines with knives or pliers, which won't properly prevent the rust buildup that causes lines to overheat.