

The Goretzka Case

Allegheny Energy sued over Irwin woman's death

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The family of an Irwin woman who died in June after a high-voltage power line shocked her filed a complaint against Allegheny Energy yesterday, arguing that the company was negligent in its installation and maintenance of the wire.

At about 4:28 p.m. on June 2, the lawsuit says, Carrie Goretzka, 39, lost all power in her home on West Hempfield Drive. No adverse weather conditions existed in the area at the time. She saw a fire coming from the power lines in her backyard, and went into her garage to retrieve her cell phone. She walked out into her side yard to call 911. At that point, the complaint says, a 7,200-volt power line fell from a pole in her yard, struck Mrs. Goretzka and knocked her to the ground.

She was shocked continuously and caught on fire. Mrs. Goretzka's mother-in-law, JoAnn Goretzka, attempted to help her daughter-in-law, but shocked her fingertips during her attempt. Carrie Goretzka's children, Chloe, 4, and Carlie, 2, watched as their mother struggled.

Employees from the power company arrived and removed the line from Mrs. Goretzka's body. She died three days later, with burns covering 85 percent of her body, several fingers severed from her left hand and her left arm amputated.

Michael J. Goretzka, 40, as the parent of Chloe and Carlie, and JoAnn Goretzka, 65, filed a complaint against Allegheny Energy Inc., Allegheny Power and West Penn Power Co. yesterday in the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas.

The complaint says the defendants should have known the power line was in danger of falling, since the same line had fallen five years earlier.

In the early summer of 2004, the same power line fell from the pole in Michael Goretzka's backyard, said Shanin Specter, of Philadelphia law firm Kline & Specter, who is representing the Goretzka family in its case. A neighbor was inside, heard a noise and saw the line on fire in the Goretzka's yard. The neighbor took several pictures, which he provided to Mr. Specter.

The power company did not provide an explanation for the incident, Mr. Specter said, and there was no inclement weather on the date of the incident.

A spokesman for Allegheny Energy had no knowledge of a previous incident. The complaint alleges wrongful death, negligence and negligent infliction of emotional distress and asks for damages.

"We are investigating the incident," said Allegheny Energy spokesman Doug Collafella. "We are very concerned about it and our condolences go out to the family."