

COMMERCE COMMISSION

Illinois Commerce Commission, On Its Own)	22-0486
Motion)	
-vs-)	
Commonwealth Edison Company)	
)	
Order Requiring Commonwealth Edison)	
Company to file an Initial Multi-Year)	(cons.)
Integrated Grid Plan and Initiating Proceeding)	
to Determine Whether the Plan is Reasonable)	
and Complies with the Public Utilities Act.)	
)	
Commonwealth Edison Company)	23-0055
)	
Verified Petition for Approval of a Multi-Year)	
Rate Plan under Section 16-108.18 of the)	
Public Utilities Act.)	

**DIRECT TESTIMONY OF CHERYL WATSON
ON BEHALF OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND**

EDF Ex. 2.0

May 22, 2023

1 **I. Introduction**

2 **Q. Please state our name and address.**

3 A. My name is Cheryl Watson and I live in the Chatham neighborhood of Chicago.

4 **Q. By whom are you employed and in what capacity?**

5 A. I am the founder and owner of Equitable Resilience & Sustainability, LLC.

6 **Q. On whose behalf are you submitting testimony?**

7 A. I am submitting testimony on behalf of the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF).

8 **Q: What company provides electricity to your home?**

9 A: Commonwealth Edison (ComEd).

10 **Q: Please tell us about your community.**

11 A. I am a child of Chatham, whose parents were part of the first wave of African American
12 residents to overcome the racial barriers to homeownership in the Chicago south side
13 community. My parents struggled with only one income to support eight children and secure a
14 home mortgage. As more African Americans moved to the community, they collectively took
15 action to get two additional modern elementary schools built for the swelling number of children.
16 They began to seek access to the many community churches, community resources like
17 swimming pools, parks, membership in segregated community organizations, and after school
18 programs. After several years, African American owned businesses were eventually established
19 along the business corridors.

20 Chatham still contained swaths of natural prairie, sand dunes, forest preserves, backyard
21 orchards and gardens. It was a sustainable and walkable community with local jobs, medical and
22 life essential services, community gardens, and our teachers lived in the community. The
23 “Chatham State of Mind” intentionally committed to upholding high social etiquette, maintaining

24 property values, and community activism to ban the opening of any new liquor stores. The
25 residents beautified their property, supported the local businesses and churches to sustain an
26 economically thriving and socially conscious, nature-centered, moderate to middle class healthy
27 community. It was the only moderate to middle class African American neighborhood jewel in
28 the Chicago crown of neighborhoods.

29 Growing up immersed in the small-town beauty around me and guided by the positive
30 opportunities through 12 years of Girl Scouting and supportive life teachers and ministers, I
31 started on my youthful journey, embodied with a compassionate spirit, to be of service to society.
32 Participating in helping others by raising funds for UNICEF, served as high school student
33 Candy Striper at the University of Chicago hospital performing general lab testing; crafted
34 blankets to deliver to the elderly at a local nursing home for Christmas; traveled to the Girl Scout
35 Jamboree in Montreal, Canada to meet and network with other scouts from many places; as well
36 as attended many great outdoors, confidence building activities through summer and winter
37 camping trips. These are just a few of the opportunities that family and community advocates
38 poured into my education about different cultures, plants, animals and developing life skills.

39 In the midst of this healthy living, seen but without understanding, in the distance were
40 some inconvenient truths. Towering smokestacks at the U.S Steel mill and the plumes of smoke
41 rising from the city garbage incinerators that projected odorous emissions throughout the night
42 sky. Summer nights were interrupted by the mosquito fogging trucks that slowly rolled through
43 the neighborhood street like an invasion seen in a horror movie polluting the air with toxic
44 pesticides for years before they were banned.

45 The area continues to be impacted by sewer backup into basements with more frequent
46 heavy rainfall due to climate change. No solution has yet been proposed or funded to correct the

47 100-year-old combined sewer system in a community that is at a lower elevation which delays
48 the movement of the soiled water from flowing out of the system fast enough before it enters the
49 basements. Diseased trees have been removed with little outreach to property owners or
50 information to encourage proper tree care so the trees can mature into healthy specimens to fill in
51 the lost canopy and thus improve the benefits of cooling and cleaning the air. As growing
52 concerns about water, flooding and air pollution were in the news, my interest in public health
53 and the Earth grew as well. I made the decision to study Biology in college and aspired to be a
54 medical doctor.

55 **Q: Tell us about your professional journey.**

56 A: My educational accomplishments are diverse and rooted in the sciences and education. I
57 earned my B.A. in Biological Sciences – Pre Med from Northwestern University in 1976 and
58 continued post-graduate studies in Microbiology and Immunology at the Illinois Institute of
59 Technology.

60 As the field of Information Technology was expanding, I was offered a Systems Analyst
61 position at Allstate Insurance in Northbrook, Illinois. This career shift included learning multiple
62 coding languages, methods of systems and business analysis, business writing, technical process
63 and procedure manual writing, business software development, project management tools and
64 integrated project team management. I earned a M.S. in Computer Science and
65 Telecommunication Systems from DePaul University in 1992 and earned a Certificate in Project
66 Management from the Illinois Institute of Technology - Applied Sciences. My IT career spanned
67 20 years across multiple sectors including large telecommunications network companies, banks;
68 commercial and health insurance companies and supply chain companies.

69 With the technological shift in the IT field, I answered the call for science degreed
70 professionals to join the ranks of educators. I completed an accelerated teacher certification in
71 science education and earned a Master of Education in Instructional Leadership from the
72 University of Illinois-Chicago. After teaching Early Childhood and Elementary School hands-on
73 science for several years, my love of the advanced sciences spurred me to accept an opportunity
74 at the Illinois Institute of Technology - Education department initiative funded by the Gates
75 Foundation to join the ranks of High School Instructional Coaches. The role included developing
76 Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Baxter Center for Science Education - Biotechnology rigorous
77 and innovative curriculum materials used to train and mentor teacher cohorts from eleven
78 Chicago high schools in disadvantaged communities.

79 While I have always been connected to nature, my first formal education in sustainability
80 and climate change came through Green Teacher Network programs facilitated by Openlands,
81 Chicago Botanic Garden, Garfield Park Conservatory and Morton Arboretum focused on plant
82 science, food gardening and Chicago's ecosystems. My interest in grassroots advocacy and
83 citizen science led me to the Chicago Conservation Corps leadership training. This curriculum
84 taught me about the Chicago built environment, water infrastructure and community organizing
85 for citizen science projects such as RainReady Chatham urban flooding initiative. I served as the
86 Steering Committee Chairperson and thought leader in collaboration with the Center for
87 Neighborhood Technology to raise community voices about urban flooding by crafting a Rain
88 Ready Chatham Plan to propose to the city. I also served as Chicago community organizer with
89 the Virginia Tech U.S. Water lead-level Study led by Dr. Marc Edwards in 2018. We trained
90 volunteer citizens to collect their household drinking water samples to submit for water lead
91 testing provided by Virginia Tech's laboratory. A report from aggregated data informed the city

92 of areas of high lead concentrations and the recommendation to remove lead service lines sooner
93 rather than later. No amount of lead is safe. In 2019, I served as a Metropolitan Mayors
94 Caucus/Americorps - Greenest Region Corp leader. In this internship I worked with the
95 Metropolitan Planning Council, IBM and Blue Conduit AI developers to provide technical
96 assistance to the Village of Hazel Crest, Illinois on their lead service line inventory project plan
97 development.

98 Following the internship, my experience culminated in the decision to expand my
99 knowledge bandwidth about building a healthier, safer and more resilient city. My advocacy
100 work during the most recent two years is centered in public health + clean energy + safe drinking
101 water as a policy strategist, environmental justice program thought leader and grassroots subject
102 matter expert at the local, state and national level. Some of the stakeholder convenings include
103 the Chicago Environmental Equity Working Groups (Water, Climate & Energy, Cumulative
104 Impact & Land Use, Lead Service Line Replacement), Chicago Climate Action Plan Working
105 group, Chicago Decarbonization Plan work group, National Environmental Justice Advisory
106 Council and Black Chicago Water Council Program Thought Leader & Outreach Strategist.

107 My experience has taught me that it is important that discussions about utility
108 accountability and community benefits include public health experts, housing agencies,
109 community stakeholders, legislators, environmental experts and financial experts. The
110 intersectionality of energy transition, climate preparedness, and decarbonization of buildings are
111 complex goals that we must meet. Consumer stakeholders who can least afford the cost of energy
112 transition should not be expected to also pay for the continuation of fossil fuel infrastructure and
113 budget overruns that will result in under used stranded utility assets. The need for clean energy
114 job training opportunities, clean affordable energy and safe affordable drinking water are also a

115 cumulative burden to disadvantaged communities and must be factored into business budget
116 practices and policy making. The cumulative impacts on the health and wealth of consumers
117 make it impossible for disenfranchised areas to participate in the city reaching its GHG reduction
118 goals, community attaining building improvements, and gaining improved health outcomes.

119 My motivations are personal as well. I have been around long enough to see the impacts
120 of climate change first-hand in my own neighborhood, from when I was a child until now. I am
121 passionate about this work because it is important to find healthy, holistic community benefits
122 and solutions to solve environmental problems. I see my purpose in helping to educate those who
123 are not at the traditional decision-making tables and vice versa those who should invite the
124 consumers to regularly be a voice in the room as strategies are deliberated.

125 **Q. How has climate change impacted you directly?**

126 A. I have lived in my childhood home for over 50 years and it was built in about 1936. I
127 went through a weatherization program that added insulation in the attic, installed doors to
128 eliminate drafts from the enclosed sun porch, a refrigerator and a large window air conditioner.
129 These amenities did help reduce air leaks and keep the home warmer for several years. But now
130 the impacts of climate change are very noticeable. For example, when it is cold out, it is difficult
131 to stabilize the heating at a comfortable level temperature during the extreme colder winter
132 events. Sheltering more at home due to the pandemic and therefore having to maintain a higher
133 temperature than if I was away from home led to higher bills. When your income decreases it is
134 impossible to keep up a payment plan. If you have a medical condition where your body can't
135 regulate hot or cold temperatures, the importance of utility service is even more important. In
136 fact, in the winter I had to cordon off my living space to areas that had fewer windows and wind
137 exposure. I had to use heavier layers of clothing and blankets to try and stay comfortably warm.

138 The LIHEAP assistance was helpful but it does not cover the astronomical arrearage that
139 remains. Consumers have to seek out additional programs that might assist with utility bills
140 which aren't always available.

141 **Q. How else have you seen those disparities in your life?**

142 A. I have seen the disparities throughout my life and career. I have worked in poor Chicago
143 Public Schools and in expensive private schools as an educator. I have seen the difference in the
144 quality of education children receive. Students in affluent schools have modern textbooks, state-
145 of-the-art lab equipment, advanced technology, regular field trips, and more. Students in poorer
146 schools have out-of-date textbooks, no science or computer labs, and more violence.

147 I've seen the disparities in my sustainability and environmental work as well. I have seen
148 that minority communities have poorer public health, more air pollution, poorer water quality,
149 and more instances of lead pipes. Some more affluent north side wards were able to get more
150 green infrastructure and trees planted to maintain tree canopies. Water and sewer main upgrades
151 which may also include lead water service line replacement are given priority over historically
152 underserved south and west side Black communities that don't have an opportunity to be at the
153 decision-table. I have seen the difference in resources and level of outreach education for
154 addressing sustainability in the suburbs as opposed to lower-wealth areas in Chicago. In an
155 environmental sustainability internship program I participated in, I observed that the wealthier,
156 whiter host communities were already making progress in investing in more sustainable, resilient
157 and cleaner policies and technology.

158 In disinvested communities, the civil rights and social justice cumulative burdens that
159 exist overshadow the climate change impacts like urban flooding, air pollution, and heat island

160 effect in the community, often repeatedly saddling those communities with polluters, lack of
161 enforcement in violations, idling fleet vehicles, and poor street sanitation.

162 I have seen the disparities in air quality, with the placement of polluting industries in
163 Black, southside communities. After steel mills were shut down in the 1990s, the air was
164 noticeably better. But now, a new mill has moved nearby and you can smell and taste the oil, the
165 same I remember as a child, early in the morning air. I have seen the impacts of heat islands and
166 increased numbers of heat stroke victims, worsened by more frequent and more severe
167 underlying health conditions. I've experienced first-hand getting less thorough medical care and
168 having to fight to get good treatment.

169 Things as simple as getting around my neighborhood during or after a storm are more
170 challenging than in more affluent communities. Traffic congestion is terrible in Chatham,
171 especially in bad weather. A few years ago during a big snow storm, our streets weren't plowed
172 and cars were piled everywhere. I tried to leave my house but after traveling about a mile I
173 realized it was not possible. It took me another two hours to get back home just a couple of
174 minutes away. That was an eye-opening experience for me. The nearest hospital for my
175 community is one of the worst for emergency care. What would have happened if I had a
176 medical emergency? Or, if my power went out, how could I have gotten somewhere else to stay
177 warm? This is just one example of how an event that may be an inconvenience for some
178 neighborhoods is particularly challenging in disinvested communities. Of course, weather and
179 traffic congestion are not things the utility can control. I mention these examples because they
180 are compounding factors for vulnerable communities. The collective impact of factors like these
181 is greater than the sum of their parts.

182 Time and again, I have seen decision-makers ignore the challenges Black communities
183 face. It feels like we are expendable or like we matter less because public health in our
184 communities is poorer and life spans are shorter. And all of this only gets worse as climate
185 change worsens and impacts our communities the most, but we are the least prepared for the
186 daily challenges of climate change much less the resulting catastrophic events. I worry about
187 what will happen to me and my neighbors as weather events get even more extreme.

188 **Q. Are there things that would improve ComEd's ability to make a meaningful impact**
189 **on you and your community?**

190 A. More purposeful outreach to consumers is needed and should take into account the
191 educational bandwidth in the community. The information provided currently may be too
192 complicated to digest and make energy decisions to reduce usage and cost of energy monthly.
193 More in-person consultation is needed to communicate what program savings would look like to
194 the consumer. ComEd should pursue closer partnerships with state and local utility assistance
195 programs that could also be a lifeline to relieve energy burden.

196 For instance, in addition to LIHEAP and utility payment plans, the Illinois Housing
197 Development Authority is offering grants for up to \$60,000 to eligible property owners to help
198 with arrearages, including mortgage, insurance, utilities, and property taxes. How can ComEd
199 include information on programs like this before disconnection notices are sent? Customers need
200 time to get assistance or a livable income. There should not be any shut offs if a consumer has
201 extenuating medical conditions. Improving payment options to include a debt forgiveness
202 program if specific payment goals are met.

203 In addition, more information about options like the Illinois Solar for All program needs
204 to be provided in order to maximize the reach and benefits of this program. ComEd and the

205 Illinois Commerce Commission can and should play a role in conjunction with the community in
206 order to ensure that people understand how they can find a way to participate and benefit from
207 clean energy solutions. Support for the roll out of new technology and programs like this, and
208 related rate structures to make them work for communities,¹ is critical.

209 More active recruitment and training for community members through workforce
210 development for fields like energy efficiency and community engagement - including work with
211 community colleges and high school vocational training, is also important. Careers in growing
212 fields like these can serve the utilities' needs and increase prosperity and ownership for
213 communities in need - the type of community-centric approach that will have wide-ranging
214 benefits.

215 Finally, as a matter of affordability and equity, investments in weatherization and energy
216 efficiency should be accelerated for disadvantaged communities to offer long-term relief.
217 Housing stock in these neighborhoods tend to be less efficient and residents tend to have the
218 highest energy burdens. It is the most impactful investment a utility can make. It will also
219 contribute to the achievement of the city's climate change goals.

220 **Q. What do you find missing from current energy policy conversations?**

221 The related and intersecting public health impacts of energy are not often part of how we
222 evaluate options or establish outcomes. All of the current and future policy solutions must begin
223 with the premise that they will not exacerbate health hazards to impacted and disadvantaged
224 communities. Environmental harms and the stress-related consequences of social and economic
225 disparities lead to poor social determinants of health for many. As we aspire to address these

¹ Hawaii leads the way on advanced rate design with default time-of-use rates, fixed charge innovations, Utility Dive, <https://www.utilitydive.com/news/hawaii-advanced-rate-design-default-time-of-use-fixed-charge-innovations/648994/> (May 9, 2023).

226 disparities in the energy system, health assessments are critical to understanding the impacts and
227 need to be part of the policy discussions.

228 An example of the intersection of energy policy and health implications is the 60-day
229 limitation on disconnection protection for customers with medical conditions. I have a condition
230 that keeps my body from regulating heat and cold, so I have to rely on tools inside my home to
231 maintain healthy temperatures. For customers like me, losing service can be life threatening.
232 Unfortunately, as I understand it, ComEd limits medical disconnection exemptions to only 60
233 days without an extended option for those with chronic conditions, and you can't use the medical
234 exemption twice within 12 months. Lives are at stake in these decisions; much more flexibility
235 and a diversity of approaches are needed to avoid harm to customers.

236 **Q. What do you want the Commission to take away from your testimony?**

237 A. People's lives and the planet are at stake. The changes taking place in the industry offer
238 an opportunity for utilities and the ICC to do things differently. Meaningful engagement with
239 impacted communities to understand what is needed and utilizing approaches that can be reach
240 those most in need with utility programs should be at the forefront of decision making. Structure
241 programs to serve customers first and not just allow utilities to move forward with increasing
242 profits regardless of community needs.

243 **Q. Does this conclude your testimony?**

244 A. Yes.