

**STATE OF ILLINOIS
ILLINOIS COMMERCE COMMISSION**

Illinois Commerce Commission, On Its Own)	22-0487
Motion)	
-vs-)	
Ameren Illinois Company d/b/a/ Ameren)	
Illinois)	
)	
Order Requiring Ameren Illinois Company to)	
file an Initial Multi-Year Integrated Grid Plan)	(cons.)
and Initiating Proceeding to Determine Whether)	
the Plan is Reasonable and Complies with the)	
Public Utilities Act.)	
)	
Ameren Illinois Company d/b/a Ameren Illinois)	23-0082
)	
Petition for Approval of a Multi-Year Rate Plan)	
pursuant to 220 ILCS 5/16-108.18.)	
)	

**DIRECT TESTIMONY OF KELLY MCCLEARY
ON BEHALF OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND**

EDF Ex. 1.0

May 11, 2023

1 **I. INTRODUCTION**

2 **Q. Can you please introduce yourself?**

3 A. Yes. My name is Kelly McCleary. I live in White Heath, Illinois with my family of five:
4 myself, my husband, and three children ages 16, 13, and 9.

5 **Q. Are you a customer of Ameren Illinois?**

6 A. I am. I live in an all-electric home, so I am a customer of Ameren Illinois electric, but not
7 Ameren Illinois gas.

8 **Q. Can you tell us about your experience as an Ameren Illinois electric customer?**

9 A. Affordability and customer service issues are the big problems I have with Ameren
10 Illinois. I have not had any other major problems with them.

11 **Q. Can you tell us about your problems with affordability of Ameren Illinois electric
12 service?**

13 A. Yes. I moved to a new home in June 2022. In the process, I was very careful to stay
14 within a budget, including asking the previous owner about utility bills. When we
15 purchased the home, we knew that the house was built in the 1970s and was all-electric.
16 The house is heated using baseboard heating upstairs and ceiling heat downstairs. For
17 cooling, it has two wall-mounted units. It is approximately 2,200 square feet. We knew
18 the house was not as efficient as it could be. What we did not know was that Ameren
19 Illinois rates were scheduled to go up by 54% in July 2022.

20 **Q. What impact did that rate increase have on the bills for your new house?**

21 A. We knew going in that the previous owner was frugal and lived alone. We knew our bills
22 would likely be higher than the \$200 per month she told us about. But we were not ready
23 for our first month to be \$400 to \$500, more than double what we were expecting.

24 **Q. What was your reaction to that first bill?**

25 A. I thought, “Oh no. This is not good.” But we were careful. We worked to use less
26 electricity. Like most people, we turn the thermostat down at night in the winter and up at
27 night in the summer. We researched different ways to save money. We looked at buying
28 a heat pump, which itself would cost \$8,000, but we would still need ductwork added to
29 the house, which would add another \$20,000 on top of that. Doing a project that large
30 would require a loan.

31 I also looked at Ameren Illinois’ smart thermostat program. But I researched
32 those thermostats, and they are not compatible with my system of baseboard heating.

33 I looked into getting solar. But we live in the woods and have too much shade to
34 generate solar on our property.

35 I also looked into getting geothermal. But again, that would have been difficult
36 with tree roots, and would also require the \$20,000 in ductwork.

37 I have also thought about a home energy audit, but if I cannot afford the upgrades,
38 it does not do any good.

39 Trying to figure out how to be more energy efficient, I felt like I was going in
40 blind.

41

42 **II. Affordability**

43 **Q. Are you concerned about Ameren Illinois' proposed rate increase?**

44 A. Yes, very. Ameren Illinois' most recent rate increase has already made it harder to afford
45 energy efficiency upgrades. If I could figure out every month how to pay my high electric
46 bills, it would make it way easier to pay \$200 on a loan for a more efficient home. High
47 energy bills become a vicious cycle where I can't afford upgrades that would reduce my
48 energy usage. If someone is burdened with paying exorbitantly high energy bills, they
49 can't be expected to afford efficiency upgrades or more renewable forms of energy. I fail
50 to see the point of renewable energy infrastructure improvement if no one can afford
51 electric service to begin with.

52 **Q. What do you want the Commission to consider based on your experience?**

53 A. First, the Commission should understand that the higher rates get, the fewer customers
54 will be able to afford to invest in energy efficiency and save in the future. This also raises
55 equity concerns. I know that energy efficiency investments can save us money in the
56 long-term, but I also know that my household cannot afford the substantial initial
57 investment to unlock those future savings. Plenty of households are worse off than us
58 financially. I don't know what they're supposed to do to afford service. The Commission
59 should also understand why it is important for a utility to have a wide variety of energy
60 efficiency programs so that every customer can find some program that works for them.
61 This includes people who may live in remote or wooded locations, and people who
62 cannot afford to float the cost of a 5-figure investment for several years.

63 Also, I know that this case is to consider Ameren's four-year grid plan and rate
64 plan. In evaluating Ameren's plans, I think the Commission should consider what

65 investments are truly necessary and what investments could be avoided with lower-cost
66 alternatives like more aggressive and more diverse energy efficiency programs.

67 **III. Customer Service**

68 **Q. When you said earlier that you felt like you were going in blind to make your bill**
69 **more affordable, why did you feel that way?**

70 A. Because Ameren Illinois told me, “We can’t help you.”

71 **Q. Did Ameren say anything else?**

72 A. Yes. One thing they asked is whether I had considered using less power. Of course we
73 had considered using less. I was calling Ameren to try to figure out how to use less. I
74 know that Ameren probably provides a standard set of questions for customers calling
75 about high bills.

76 Still, the way the question was worded became a running joke in our house. When
77 someone says they are hungry, we’ll ask “have you considered using less food?” Things
78 like that. Ameren might consider rephrasing how it asks this question so it does not come
79 across so strongly. Maybe instead of asking “have you considered using less power,” ask
80 customers “are you interested in learning more ways to reduce your power?” and then go
81 into a series of questions that can help the customer find the best ways they can save
82 power right away and over the long run.

83

84 **Q. Did Ameren help you figure out ways to use less power?**

85 A. Not really. They did not tell me about any energy efficiency programs. All they said was
86 to think about getting new insulation. But if my electric bill is \$850, how can I afford
87 better insulation? I basically had to hang up.

88 They did not tell me about the home energy audit program, which I recently found
89 out I might be eligible to receive free of charge.

90 **Q. Do you feel if they had let you know about the home energy audit program, you
91 would have taken them up on the offer?**

92 A. Yes.

93 **Q. Do you feel like the home energy audit program could have helped you earlier?**

94 A. It might have been helpful to know ways to save some energy, but unless I can afford the
95 fixes the audit identifies the audit itself does not really do anything for me. It is important
96 to provide a variety of solutions with a home energy audit program so that I can find
97 affordable ways to save money right away, and try to use those savings to find even more
98 effective ways to save money in the long run.

99 **Q. What could Ameren Illinois have done to better serve you in your situation?**

100 A. The customer service representative seemed to be trying their best. I don't fault them.
101 However, their suggestions seemed to be improvised from personal familiarity, judging
102 by the simplicity (the equivalent to tech support asking if you've tried turning a device
103 off and back on again) and incompleteness (not mentioning the free audit program) of
104 their recommendations. My understanding is that customer service representatives are
105 trained on scripts that they reference when certain FAQ topics come up. I did not get the
106 impression that Ameren Illinois had provided their customer service representative

107 training and information on the utility's energy efficiency offerings. Ameren Illinois can
108 help customers like me by making cost-saving program information more readily
109 available, including training their customer service representatives to provide this
110 information when a customer calls about affordability concerns.

111 **Q. Have you researched anything else?**

112 A. At the end of the year, the state is offering incentives and rebates on things like heat
113 pumps. I am hoping to look into that. Hopefully they add up to more than Ameren Illinois
114 raises my bills by. Otherwise, I will be falling farther behind with or without these
115 programs.

116 I've gotten a few quotes and expert opinions about getting solar panels installed at
117 my home, but I have too many trees so it's just not an option. I even went as far as
118 researching the cost to cut down some of the trees on my property to allow for more
119 sunlight, but it would cost tens of thousands of dollars and makes no financial or
120 environmental sense.

121 **Q. What does it take for you to be able to afford your high energy bills?**

122 A. In December 2022, we reached record cold temperatures, nearing -20 degrees around
123 Christmas. Between November and December, we used approximately 4,500 kWh of
124 electricity. The charges for that month were over \$650, bringing our total balance to over
125 \$1,000. Right after Christmas.

126 I was able to call Ameren Illinois and get on a payment program for this bill with
127 no problem. The payment plan took the payment and split it into 12 parts, and each part
128 was added to the next 12 bills. Unlike my experience inquiring about how to reduce my

129 bills, the customer service representative clearly was well-prepared to handle signing me
130 up for a payment plan.

131 Then, between December and January, we used approximately 5,400 kWh, and
132 saw additional charges over \$760. With my first payment plan amount added, the bill was
133 over \$825. I immediately thought “now we’ve got a big problem.”

134 This time, I called Ameren Illinois again, about a new payment plan, but their
135 response was “we can’t help you.” I was upset, really mad. I called local politicians, and
136 my local state representative. They tried to help, but there was only so much they could
137 do. Ameren Illinois gave them a list of programs we might qualify for, but we do not
138 qualify for any of them because we are over the income cap.

139 What helped was I got on Twitter and tagged Ameren in a tweet. Ameren sent me
140 a message on Twitter. That’s how I got on the new payment plan. That’s not how you
141 should be running a business or helping people. And Ameren is a business.

142 **Q. Does the payment plan help you?**

143 A. Temporarily. It does not solve the problem. It helps me get paycheck to paycheck, month
144 to month. But it perpetuates, because my monthly bills are still too high, and then I add
145 another \$100 to whatever my bill is. The payment plan puts off a payment, but it only
146 gets you by for a short amount of time so you can keep your electricity on. Maybe it
147 helps Ameren, since they’re keeping a customer and continuing getting paid, but for me,
148 it is treading water at best, and I fell behind again. On April 27, I received disconnection
149 notice. This time, instead of calling Ameren, I went straight to Twitter. I would have used
150 a chat function on their website, but I did not see one, which I thought was strange.

151 Through the Twitter direct message, Ameren agreed to a new payment plan if I paid \$540

152 that day; the rest will roll over to be spread out over a longer time period, like the last
153 payment plan. This time, it is an 18 month payment plan. I also signed up for budget
154 billing, so my monthly bills will be \$500/month for the next 18 months -- \$416 for my
155 usage, and \$84/month to pay off my old amounts. At least the bill won't be a mystery or a
156 shock every month, but that is still more than my family can afford. It will be a struggle
157 for us. With Ameren Illinois proposing this huge rate hike, I am uncertain about how long
158 I can keep this up.

159 **Q. Do you have any other customer service concerns?**

160 A. Yes. My bills are confusing. The number of line items and the lack of any explanation
161 about what each one is for is confusing. I was trying to compare my bill with friends. Our
162 reaction was just "what even is this?" It looks like they make it as hard to read and
163 confusing as possible. You almost need a class on how to understand it. I recently learned
164 that Ameren has a website on "how to read your bill." It would be helpful if that website
165 were directly on the bill. It would also help if the website were easier to type in.
166 Currently, it is too long: [https://www.ameren.com/illinois/account/customer-](https://www.ameren.com/illinois/account/customer-service/bill/understanding-your-bill)
167 [service/bill/understanding-your-bill](https://www.ameren.com/illinois/account/customer-service/bill/understanding-your-bill). It would be much easier to find if it were something
168 like <https://www.ameren.com/illinois/how-to-read-your-bill>.

169 Ameren Illinois does do some things right, though. There are items on the bill that
170 are helpful if you look for them. For example, there's a part of my bill that shows my
171 usage and what my bill would look like if I used under 1500 kWh.

172 Ameren Illinois also has some tools on their website that are useful, like looking
173 at usage, and seeing my billed usage compared to last year, and seeing how my usage

174 changes based on temperature. I have looked at those tools and tried to use them as I try
175 to save energy.

176 **Q. Do you have any more thoughts on Ameren Illinois' rate increase request?**

177 A. I am all in on infrastructure and preparing for renewable energy. But I want the money to
178 go to useful, necessary infrastructure, not more profits to shareholders. Ratepayers are
179 being asked to dig deep in their pockets for this rate increase, so Ameren should have to
180 dig deeper, too. I hope someone is looking at where all Ameren Illinois' last rate increase
181 went. Ameren needs to focus its spending on what is actually necessary to serve its
182 customers. Optics are a big deal.

183 I also hope Ameren and the Commission are looking at other states that have
184 more energy affordability. Did Ameren look for those programs?

185 **IV. Equity**

186 **Q. Are you worried about increased electricity costs for your community?**

187 A. Yes. Our family makes a combined income above the cap for payment assistance. But we
188 are one disaster or unexpected bill away from not being able to pay the electric bill or
189 mortgage. I am kind of in limbo, and I don't know how I'm going to keep paying for this.
190 I hate to sound like I am complaining, but I know for some people, the bill is bigger than
191 their mortgage.

192 I have a really good job as an office administrator for a university; my husband
193 has a good job as a high school math teacher. We live in a good school district. We are
194 not making a ton of money, but you would think we are doing okay on the surface. I
195 know there are people much worse off. If we can't afford these bills, how can anyone? I
196 also wonder about people with medical conditions who could not survive without

197 electricity. What would they do? I think a lot of people are in the same boat. My mom,
198 who is retired and also cares for my sister is having a hard time paying. I have a friend
199 who makes even more than I do, and they also have bills of \$800 to \$900 per month. That
200 friend benefitted from a city program to get \$100 off her bill per month. I can't do that
201 because I don't live in that city. I have a friend who runs a pet shelter, who had a huge
202 energy bill. The shelter used to qualify for non-profit help but not anymore. Mine is just
203 one story; I know a lot of Ameren Illinois customers are struggling.

204 **Q. Do you have any experience of what it is like to not be able to afford electricity?**

205 A. I do. As a kid, I had a single mom. There were a couple of times we went a week without
206 power after she couldn't pay the bill. That meant no hot water. No cooking food. And
207 cold showers in the dark.

208 I know what poverty feels like and what it looks like. I'm doing better now, but it
209 really worries me we're headed in a direction where utilities will only be accessible for
210 the highly privileged, and everyone else will be in the dark. That's where we're going,
211 and it's sad.

212 Growing up, we could just go without air conditioning. Trying to use less energy,
213 my husband and I talked about how the kids are just going to have to be like when we
214 grew up. We talk about using the air conditioner only when it's really, really hot. The
215 problem is that temperatures keep getting higher and higher, and not using air
216 conditioning is less realistic.

217 I work from home, my husband is home in the summer, and we have three kids
218 home in the summer. There is almost always someone home using electricity. We use

219 every inch of the home. The kids know not to touch the thermostat. We are strict about
220 that.

221 **Q. What are your other thoughts on Ameren Illinois' proposed rate increase?**

222 A. I am 100% all in on infrastructure, and preparing for renewable energy. It just shouldn't
223 be on the backs of people like us. Electricity is a basic human need. They are called
224 utilities for a reason.

225 I want Ameren to think of better ways to pay for this than with higher energy
226 bills, and to slow down non-essential spending like my household has had to cut out non-
227 essential power usage and sometimes even groceries. I don't know if Ameren sought
228 grants or worked with the state for funding. I am doing everything I can to cover my costs
229 myself; is Ameren?

230 Ideally, a household income-based cap on energy bills would be great. As an
231 example, if your household makes \$40,000 per year, your monthly electric bill would not
232 be more than \$100. In the very least, a household income-based sliding scale rate would
233 be a good compromise. For instance, if you household income is less than \$70,000 per
234 year, your rate would be half as much as a household making \$140,000 per year.

235 My understanding is that Ameren Illinois has proposed a low-income discount for
236 gas customers of \$10 or \$20 per month. Why haven't they proposed a low-income
237 discount for electric customers? Not that \$10 or \$20 per month would make a difference,
238 especially if people in my situation would even qualify, but I would think Ameren would
239 have to provide low-income discounts at least as big for electric customers as its gas
240 customers if it wants to meet CEJA's electrification goals.

241 **V. Conclusion**

242 **Q. Do you have any concluding remarks?**

243 A. I want Ameren to provide more affordable rates and better customer service to
244 communicate options to help customers like me manage their energy bills. I have been
245 especially proactive in seeking out solutions, and it has taken way more time and effort to
246 find this information than it has to. Even with the programs that are available, though, the
247 bottom line is that Ameren Illinois charges unaffordable rates for service. Ameren's rate
248 increases are claimed to be used to help improve infrastructure to accommodate the
249 increasing use of renewable energies, such as solar. What happens when their rates are so
250 high and their payment options and savings programs are so few, that people begin to
251 completely default on their bills? In the long run, if no money is coming in because
252 people like me can't afford to pay, what happens to the infrastructure improvements?
253 Increasing rates to unaffordable levels is a flawed and unrealistic approach.

254 As I said earlier, electricity is a basic human need. People should not have to
255 choose between buying groceries or paying for electricity, as I, and many others already
256 have. They are both essential. If Ameren is allowed more rate increases, only the
257 privileged will be able to heat and cool their homes, have hot water, and light. The rest of
258 us will literally be left in the dark.