

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 18, 2018

Mr. Steve Bryant
President
Columbia Gas of Massachusetts
P.O. Box 2025
Springfield, MA 01102

Dear Mr. Bryant:

I am writing to request additional information regarding the number of homes that remain uninhabitable and residents that remain displaced in Andover, Lawrence, and North Andover in the aftermath of the September 13, 2018 natural gas explosions. Over the last several weeks, we have received incomplete and inconsistent information about the number of homes that sustained permanent damage beyond repair and homes that may require major repairs before residents can return to them. For the sake of transparency, we ask that you provide more detail on how many homes are currently uninhabitable, how many homes require major repairs, how many residents remain displaced, and what assistance you have been providing and plan to provide to those residents.

The September 13 explosions and fires resulted in the death of one teenager, injured approximately 25 others, and damaged or destroyed dozens of homes.¹ It is reassuring to see that Columbia Gas has since launched a short-term mitigation plan - providing assistance to impacted residents that have been allowed to return to their homes - and pledged to “reimburse displaced residents for ... reasonable accommodations until it is safe to return home.”² However, it still unclear how many residents who were forced to vacate their residences and shelter elsewhere are presently unable to return to their homes, how Columbia Gas is determining which homes are uninhabitable, and how Columbia Gas will assist the affected residents as they secure housing in the future or conduct major home repairs.

Over the past several weeks, we have received inconsistent and incomplete estimates of how many homes remain uninhabitable and little to no information as to what if any assistance Columbia Gas has offered impacted residents with repairing their uninhabitable homes. We have received drastically different estimates on at least three occasions. In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, we had difficulty obtaining an accurate estimate of how many homes were deemed uninhabitable. A week after the explosions, you provided an estimate of 73 homes during a phone conversation and less than a week after that, representatives from your office, in correspondence with our staff, estimated that 123 homes were uninhabitable.

¹ Boston Globe, “Just after 4:30, the Lawrence police radio sounded: ‘All right, get every civilian out of this area.’,” Jenna Russell, Dugan Arnett and Milton Valencia, September 15, 2018, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/09/15/just-after-lawrence-police-radio-sounded-all-right-get-every-civilian-out-this-area/NKHnLuWcscMOD4mv4FVEiP/story.html>

² Columbia Gas, “Common Questions,” <https://www.columbiagas.com/massachusetts/common-questions>.

We have attempted to verify these numbers with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency – who informed us that they were only aware of 15 structures that were seriously destroyed, making them unsafe for habitation. Some of these structures “are multiple-unit dwellings, meaning in most cases more than one family was displaced.”³ They also noted that an additional 19 structures suffered damage limiting full use of the property. And a preliminary investigative report from the National Transportation Safety Board provided yet another different estimate, concluding that the distribution system owned by Columbia Gas “damaged 131 structures, including at least 5 homes that were destroyed.”⁴

We are deeply concerned about the effects that extended displacement will have on the Merrimack Valley residents who were told their homes are uninhabitable. Furthermore, we are troubled with how Columbia Gas plans to assist affected residents if you are unable to provide swift and accurate information regarding the number of damaged residences. In order to better understand your company’s response and strategy to assist these residents, I ask that you provide answers to the following questions no later than November 01, 2018.


1. As of today, how many residences in the Merrimack Valley are deemed uninhabitable?
 - a. How many individuals lived in these residences prior to September 13, 2018?
2. Did Columbia Gas design and deploy a standardized process for determining which residences were uninhabitable following the September 13 gas explosions and fires in the Merrimack Valley?
 - a. How does Columbia Gas define “uninhabitable home”?
3. Is Columbia Gas coordinating with state and local agencies, or other third parties in determining how many and which homes are uninhabitable?
4. Does Columbia Gas keep a record of how many residents were and are displaced as a result of the September 13 fires and gas explosions? If so, how many are currently displaced?
5. How many residents are currently receiving temporary housing assistance from Columbia Gas? What is the nature of this assistance? Does it cover in entirety the cost of temporary housing?
6. How many residents have contacted the Property Claims Helpline to request reimbursements for hotel or other displacement costs? How many reimbursement requests related to displacement has Columbia Gas completed?

³ Eagle Tribune, “MEMA: At least 15 homes uninhabitable due to fire damage,” Kiera Blessing, October 3, 2018, http://www.eagletribune.com/news/merrimack_valley/mema-at-least-homes-uninhabitable-due-to-fire-damage/article_8b8f56b9-44d4-5bca-8905-138bc318795b.html.

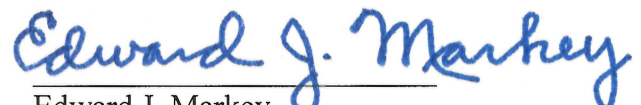
⁴ National Transportation Safety Board, “Preliminary Report Pipeline Over-pressure of a Columbia Gas of Massachusetts Low-pressure Natural Gas Distribution System,” October 11, 2018, <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Reports/PLD18MR003-preliminary-report.pdf>.

7. What, if any, plan does Columbia Gas have in place for residents who are displaced and cannot return to their homes that have been destroyed or damaged beyond repair?
8. What, if any, plan does Columbia Gas have in place for residents who were not displaced but are in homes that require significant repairs as a result of the explosions?
 - a. How many homes are there in this category?
 - b. How many residents live in these homes?

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

cc:
Joe Albanese
Commodore Builders
404 Wyman Street
Suite 400
Waltham, MA 02451