

PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION OF MARYLAND

Posting and Tracking of Utility Complaint Data

December 3, 2021

Prepared in response to the 2021 Joint Chairmen's Report from the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee and House Appropriations Committee, addressing the Commission's progress in compilation and publication of complaint-related performance metrics for regulated utilities



William Donald Schaefer Tower
6 St. Paul Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202-6806
www.psc.state.md.us

I. Introduction

The Public Service Commission of Maryland (“PSC” or “Commission”) hereby submits this report in response to the 2021 Joint Chairmen’s Report (“JCR”) from the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee and House Appropriations Committee (collectively, “Committees”), pertaining to the Commission’s progress in compilation and publication of complaint-related performance metrics for regulated utilities. In this report, the Commission provides an overview of our Consumer Affairs Division’s complaint database transition, including a preview of residential complaint data due to be published on the Commission’s website before the end of 2021. Anonymized data will include utility complaints received by zip code. This report concludes with next steps as the Commission continues to promote transparency in data sharing and publication.

II. Background

The Consumer Affairs Division (“CAD”) is the department within the PSC responsible for the investigation and resolution of complaints by Maryland ratepayers against utilities in accordance with applicable laws, regulations, and utility tariffs. CAD collects and tracks information regarding complaints received to identify potential patterns of regulatory noncompliance. The table below (Figure 1) summarizes complaints CAD received during the 2018, 2019, and 2020¹ calendar years, noting whether the complaint was made against a gas and/or electric utility, a third-party energy supplier, or other regulated entity².

Figure 1

Complaints received by CAD				
	TOTAL	Gas and Electric Utility	Third-party Energy Supplier	Other
2018	2,696	1,783	605	308
2019	2,800	1,774	710	316
2020	1,479	806	441	232

¹ CAD received significantly fewer complaints in 2020 compared to prior years, likely due to the moratorium on utility disconnections and collections activities and additional safety measures and consumer protections implemented by the Commission to offset the adversities caused by the COVID-19 outbreak.

² Other regulated entities include certain telecommunications companies as well as private water and sewer companies.

From 2018 through 2020, the share of total complaints filed against gas and electric utilities declined while the share of total complaints filed against third-party energy suppliers increased. (Figure 2)

The PSC is committed to providing transparency to Marylanders shopping for electricity suppliers to promote informed decision making. Beginning in December 2019, the Commission posts its report of suppliers that are the subject of three or more customer complaints over the course of a month. At present, this report is updated quarterly and is available on the Commission’s website.³

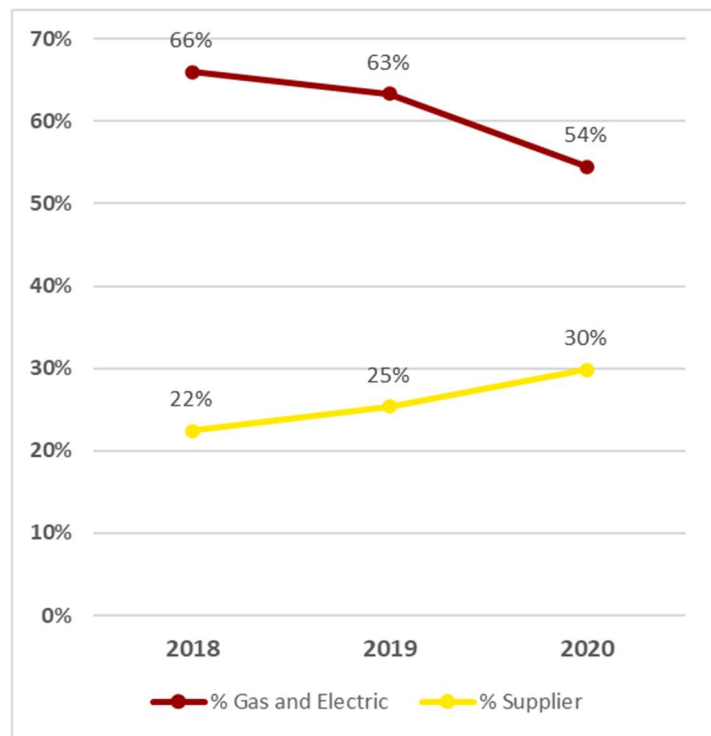


Figure 2

In addition, the PSC’s electric choice website⁴ launched in March 2020, and the gas choice website⁵ launched in September 2020. Residential electric choice is offered in the service territories of five electric utilities—Baltimore Gas and Electric Company (“BGE”), Potomac Electric Power Company (“Pepco”), Delmarva Power and Light Company (“DPL”), The Potomac Edison Company (“PE”), and Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative, Inc. (“SMECO”). Residential gas choice is offered in the service territories of two natural gas utilities—BGE and Washington Gas Light Company (“WGL”).

III. Technology Update

Accurate, comprehensive, and readily available complaint data is essential to CAD’s mission to ensure that public service companies comply with established regulations. Currently, CAD’s customer complaint information is stored in a database created in Microsoft Access. Compared to newer systems, this database is limited both in its ability to provide information in a user-friendly format and its capacity to allow for the automation of processes.

³ Public Service Commission of Maryland, “Retail Energy Supplier Complaint Report.” The report is updated quarterly and can be found at: <https://www.psc.state.md.us/retail-energy-supplier-complaint-reports/>

⁴ Access MD Electric Choice at: <https://www.mdelectricchoice.com>

⁵ Access MD Gas Choice at: <https://www.mdgaschoice.com>

In 2021, CAD worked with a contractor to develop and beta-test both a new online consumer complaint portal as well as a cloud-based complaint data management system (“CDMS” or “system”) through Salesforce Service Cloud.

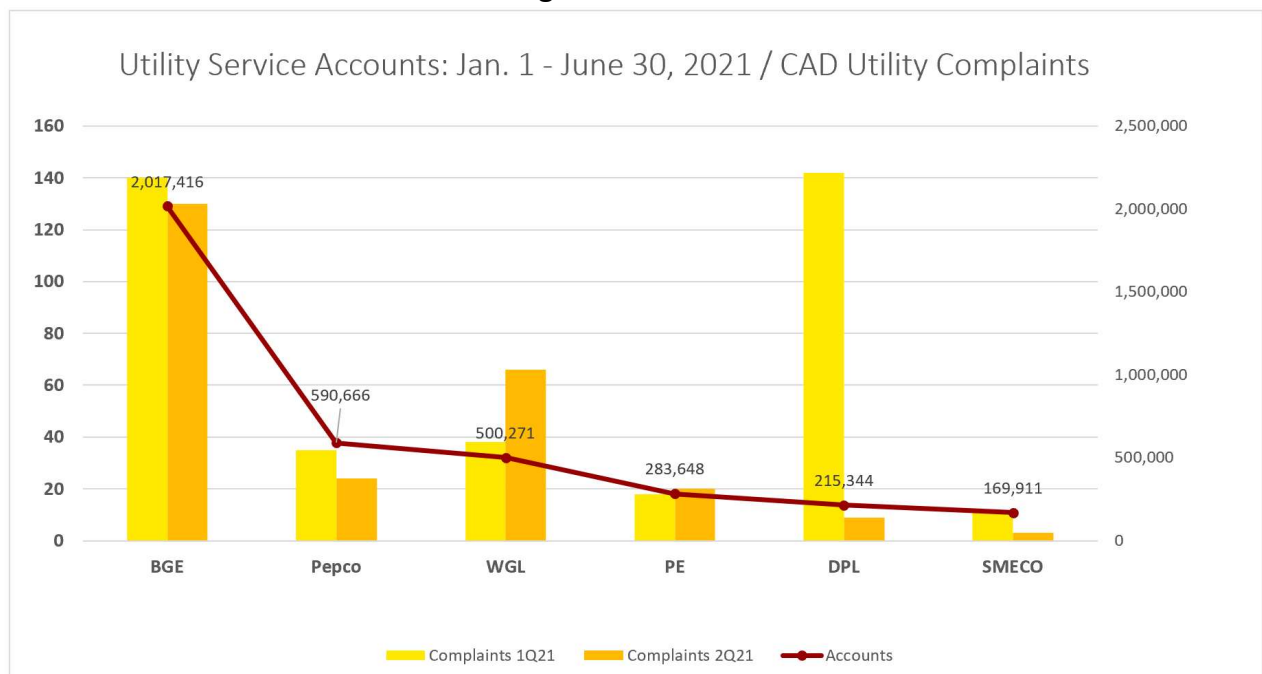
This highly customized cloud-based system will provide a streamlined platform for team collaboration, with full complaint status information available immediately to all of CAD’s system users. CAD will benefit from email integration within the CDMS and other process automations, including the elimination of the vast majority of the division’s remaining paper-based processes. Data can be viewed in dashboards and reports within the system and exported to spreadsheets for review and processing. This system upgrade will simplify the sharing of raw data and analytics in line with the Commission’s commitment to innovation that encourages the efficient delivery of public utility services.

The upcoming launch of the CDMS will enable the Commission to share nuanced data both within the agency and externally with the public, consumer advocates, and legislators. Presently, migration from CAD’s legacy database is underway, with data entered through the end of FY2021.

IV. Next Steps

CAD anticipates the launch of the new consumer complaint portal in early 2022. In addition to the energy supplier complaint reports that the PSC currently posts on its website, the PSC will begin posting data regarding complaints filed against utility companies.

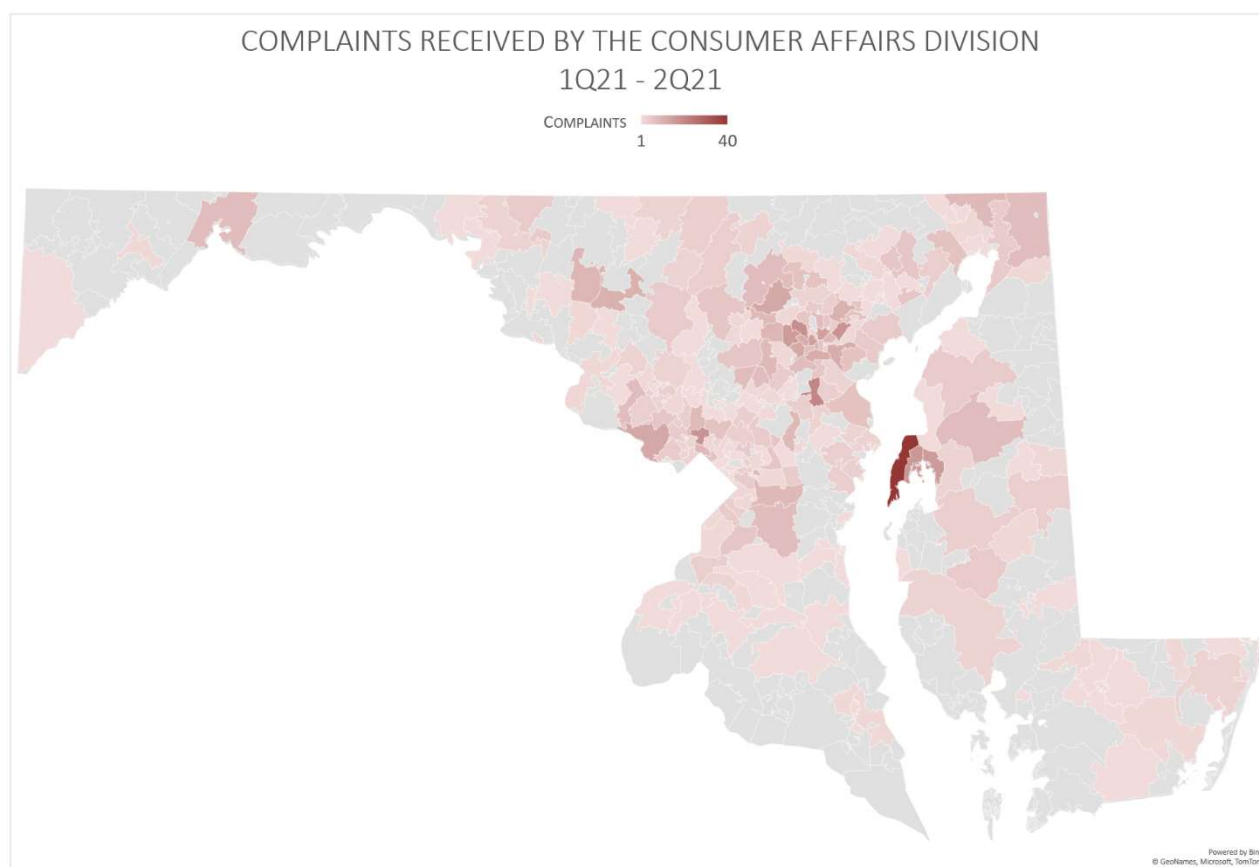
Figure 3



Although the legacy data migration is not yet complete, data is currently available in the new system through 2Q21. This complaint data, in combination with data currently available on the Commission’s website, paint a more complete picture of the utility complaint landscape across Maryland. For instance, Figure 3 illustrates the number of complaints received by CAD in 1Q21 and 2Q21 against BGE, Pepco, WGL, PE, DPL, and SMECO, as well as the number of accounts for each utility.⁶

The new system can efficiently generate datasets that include complainants’ 5-digit zip codes. This allows for convenient visualization of complaint patterns. Figure 4, below, geographically illustrates complaints received by CAD against all public utility companies and third-party energy suppliers at the zip code level throughout the State of Maryland.

Figure 4



⁶ Public Service Commission of Maryland, “Electric Choice Monthly Enrollment Report,” quarter ending June 2021, which can be found at: <https://www.psc.state.md.us/electricity/electric-choice-monthly-enrollment-reports/> and “Gas Choice Enrollment Report,” quarter ending June 2021, which can be found at: <https://www.psc.state.md.us/gas/gas-choice-enrollment-report/>

Phase 1 of the Commission's utility complaint data release will begin in late-December 2021, before the implementation and launch of CAD's new CDMS, and will include Fiscal Year 2021 data currently available in the new system. The second phase of data release will move forward upon the full launch of the new CDMS and online consumer complaint portal in 1Q22. At that time, most data related to complaints received by CAD will be published to the PSC website on a monthly basis beginning when the new system is launched.

As launch nears, the PSC will release more information publicly about the system via press release. CAD has communicated its progress regarding the creation and testing of the new system with the customer experience teams of many regulated utilities. When the launch timeline is finalized, CAD will send an additional informational communication to all regulated public utility companies and licensed third-party suppliers operating within Maryland to provide notice of minor changes to CAD's processes.

The Commission supports the State of Maryland's Open Data Act and will continue to report progress in this area. Recently, CAD Director Stephanie Bolton met virtually with Department of Information Technology's (DoIT) Director of Data Services, Julia Fischer, to provide guidance and discuss data sharing best practices. The Commission appreciates DoIT's input as the Commission structures the sharing of its raw data and plans for the future.

V. Conclusion

The PSC appreciates the opportunity to provide information about the status of its utility complaint information sharing endeavors. The Commission understands that data collection and sharing practices are constantly evolving, and the Commission will continue to assess feedback it receives regarding our processes.