

New state legislation urged on gas, electricity shutoffs

Associated Press

With the bitter cold a potentially fatal problem for people in unheated homes, several legislators called Tuesday for new procedures governing the shutoff of gas and electricity.

And they charged that three deaths last month might have been prevented if the new procedures had already been in place for utilities.

"For years, we've been dealing with the arbitrariness of decisions" by utilities on power cutoffs, said Sen. Joseph Pisani, R-Westchester.

Pisani is one of several sponsors of legislation which would put into state law procedures for cutoffs of power that are similar but slightly broader than regulations already imposed by the Public Service Commission.

The legislation, which was approved by the Assembly last year but died in the Senate, would abolish security deposits, provide for deferred payment schedules, and clarify the role of welfare departments in helping people with their unpaid utility bills.

Through the commission regulations, utilities must already allow deferred payment schedules and try to make personal contact before cutting off anyone's heat during the winter months.

"We believe that if this legislation had been approved last year, these people would not have died," said Assemblyman G. Oliver Koppell, D-Bronx, who released brief accounts of three deaths last month.



SEN. JOSEPH PISANI



ASSEMBLYMAN
G.O. KOPPELL

Information about the three cases was provided by the Public Utility Law Project, a group of lawyers working on utility issues.

Five-year-old Linda Melendez of Brooklyn died in a fire caused by a candle being used for light following the termination of electric service by Consolidated Edison, according to the PULP account. Con Ed cut off the service because of an unpaid bill of \$82.70; and an unpaid security deposit of \$25, PULP said.

Koppell said his bill would have required Con Ed to try to make personal contact with Linda's mother Ada, rather than just sending a notice as it did, before disconnecting power.