



January 2023

A Note from Your People's Counsel Sandra Mattavous-Frye

Preparing Today for a Better Energy Future

The January OPC Connection finds us fully into a new year, so allow me to use this page to recap OPC's advocacy in 2022 while framing our work ahead on behalf of DC utility consumers.



Last year was yet another period of transitioning from the lingering after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation, and life-changing global events. As we did in support of "STAY DC" --the District's pandemic relief rental and utility payment assistance program, OPC will continue to [educate](#) consumers about programs that will help them save money on energy and water bills. And our consumer specialists are keeping an ear to the

phone as they listen to struggling residents facing disconnections and help them sign up for payment plans to keep the lights on and water running. Throughout the year our consumer services specialists handled about 3,340 complaints from electric, gas, water, and telephone consumers.

We joined the Mayor and the DC Council in fostering [racial equity](#) and are shaping our advocacy and outreach with equity in mind. In October we welcomed more than 400 attendees to our virtual community [conversation](#) on environmental injustice and climate change. Stay tuned for information on a second event we will host to discuss why we all should care about climate change. We are excited that youth will be our primary audience.

OPC will build on effective collaborations with other service agencies. Our “social services summits,” attended by government, nonprofit, and community partners, were valuable forums for sharing information on how to assist mutual constituents.

In November, OPC won an important court [appeal](#) and reversal of a Public Service Commission decision that would have allowed Pepco to recover from ratepayers costs resulting from the shutdown of the Benning Road power plant. By this spring, Pepco is expected to request its first rate increase since the Commission approved Pepco’s multi-year rate plan. The PSC has scheduled February 7, 8, and 9 for community [hearings](#) on Washington Gas’s request to increase rates. You are encouraged to sign up to testify at the hearings. As with all rate cases, OPC is aggressively [advocating](#) for fair, just, and affordable gas and electric rates.

We are in an era of critical decision making around the future of utility services and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions which cause climate change and negatively affect the environment. Making the switch to electric transportation and appliances means moving away from oil and gas, and toward solar, wind, and other renewable energy sources. In the transition, OPC is focused on ensuring all residents have equitable access to clean energy options, benefits are shared, and utility services are safe, reliable, and affordable.

Even with limited ability to influence DC Water rates compared to other utilities, OPC has worked to ensure rate increases are balanced fairly with the need for infrastructure upgrades. In 2022, OPC’s Water Services Division hosted webinars to educate consumers about measures to shore up their homes during flooding and participated in a national [observance](#) called: “Imagine a Day Without Water.”

Communications services are a lifeline, particularly for our seniors. Therefore, OPC is committed to ensuring that consumers remain connected to affordable telephone options, as Verizon is replacing traditional copper wire landline service in its march toward fully digital local service. Please see more on the important issue [here](#) and below.

Whether on the local or national front, be it advocacy before the DC Council, DC Public Service Commission, or the DC Court of Appeals, OPC will ensure consumers have a voice at the table when critical decisions affecting their finances, environment, and quality of life are made.

As we are *Preparing Today for a Better Energy Future*, I am confident that as we build on OPC's achievements of 2022, our efforts in 2023 will set the stage for future generations to thrive.

OPC Hosts Community Meeting to Address Concerns about Verizon's Phone Transition



Over the last few months, OPC has received a number of inquiries and complaints about the Verizon copper-to-fiber telephone transition in the District of Columbia. Verizon recently informed many of its customers with landline phones that the company will no longer provide service over copper lines and to maintain service with Verizon, they must switch to its fiber-based product. To address consumers' concerns, on January 12, 2023, OPC hosted a discussion between Verizon, the Concerned Woodridge Seniors group, and other stakeholders. Customers had questions about the loss of phone service during power outages, the quality and frequency of information Verizon will provide on the transition, and how the fiber-based service will be regulated. See the presentation along with a fact sheet we've put together [here](#).

OPC presented an overview of copper and fiber infrastructure, the technological reasons for the transition, and a description of OPC's advocacy and jurisdictional issues before the DC Public Service Commission and the Federal Communications Commission. Woodridge community representatives had the

opportunity to explain their concerns and why the issue was important to seniors. A Verizon representative took questions about equipment, safety concerns, what consumers can expect during the transition, and individual installations. Consumers also received information on ways to contact Verizon to deal with future customer service issues.

Consumers learned that while the company has the right to undertake the transition, if customers elect to retain local landline telephone service with Verizon that is not part of a bundled package, the cost of their phone service will not change and regulation by the PSC would continue.

OPC remains available to help consumers obtain accurate information during this transition and continues to have an open dialogue with Verizon.



All the Talk about the Health Effects of Gas Stoves

What's all the buzz about gas stoves? You may have seen recent news coverage or social media posts about gas stoves and possible danger. This coverage was sparked by a January 2023 peer-reviewed [study](#) attributing 12.7% of the current childhood asthma cases in the United States to gas stove use.

Natural gas stoves can release harmful pollutants, including nitrogen dioxide into the air when in use. Recent studies also indicate that gas stoves can leak methane and other pollutants when not in use. Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change. Inside the home, nitrogen dioxide can contribute to incidents of childhood asthma and other health effects.

Concerningly, no federal agency has the authority to regulate indoor air quality, though the Consumer Product Safety Commission could consider safety standards for new gas stoves. The American Gas Association, which represents the U.S. natural gas industry, has criticized the study.

While individual circumstances vary, if you are concerned about

the potential health effects from using a gas stove and would like to reduce exposure, options include: (1) improving ventilation including your range's exhaust vent (if it goes outside) or cracking a window while cooking; (2) going electric by replacing your gas stove at the end of its useful life with an electric stove; and (3) reducing gas stove use by firing up electric tea kettles, toaster ovens, and microwaves.

OPC will follow this issue as it develops and keep District consumers informed.



Take Advantage of Federal Tax Breaks for Clean Energy Upgrades

The new year could mean more money in the bank for DC consumers who take

advantage of new tax incentives for making clean energy upgrades in their homes. The much-debated federal Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provides an unprecedented \$369 billion toward fighting climate change. Those funds have started rolling in and 2022 and 2023 benefits include:

- Tax credits to make your home more energy efficient with new heat pumps, electric panel or circuit upgrades for new electric equipment, and energy efficiency audits. The U.S. Department of Energy provides an [overview](#) of available tax credits.
- Tax credits for the purchase of certain new or used electric vehicles for income-eligible consumers. More information is available on the IRS website [here](#).

Many additional funding sources are coming down the pike later this year and in the next few years, including:

- The HOMES (Home Owner Managing Energy Savings) Rebate Program provides cash back for shrinking your home energy use through weatherization renovations, like adding insulation, or installing more efficient appliances, such as heat pump clothes dryers. The nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has an overview of rebates [here](#). Also see [information](#) from the DC Sustainable Energy Utility.

The District Department of Energy and the Environment will administer these rebates locally.

OPC can help DC consumers sort out the details of the benefits and what might apply to your home energy needs. Call us at (202) 727-3071.

Enjoy Sports in DC's Winter Wonderland Safely

Did you know that the District is brimming with [recreation](#) and sports activities throughout the winter months?

An online search will reveal a variety of [experiences](#) for you to get fit and have fun with family and friends. OPC's Water Services Division urges you to put safety first.



Consider these tips:

- Stay away from unfamiliar ice
- Wear proper clothing for icy weather
- Never leave your child unattended
- Take indoor swimming lessons even when it's cold outside
- Have an emergency plan in the event of an accident

ICE SKATING

Ice skating can be a fun form of intense cardiovascular exercise which improves balance and builds muscle in your legs and core. Even if [ice skating](#) is not part your winter fitness routine, a trip to the rink with family and friends is a fun way to get exercise. Follow these safety tips:

- Wear a helmet
- Ensure your skates fit properly
- Make sure the blades are sharp and have a slight curve
- Practice falling and carry a cushion

OPC Connecting at the PSC



PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

OPC is Advocating for Consumers in the Following Cases:

ET2022-04: Residential Customer Costs for New Underground Pepco Service Connections

On December 29, 2022, OPC filed Comments on the Notice of Proposed Tariff.

Formal Case No. 1169: The Application of Washington Gas Light Company to Increase Existing Rates and Charges for Gas Service

On January 6, 2023, OPC filed Rebuttal Testimony and Supporting Documents in this matter.

OPC Working for You: Working Groups at the PSC

OPC participates in several working groups convened by the DC Public Service Commission. These semi-formal groups made of diverse stakeholders work

collectively to resolve complex issues or develop advisory positions on matters the PSC is considering. Issues undertaken may involve consumer rights, electricity, gas, local telephone service, and climate change, among other issues. The most common working group members are OPC, Pepco, Washington Gas, the DC government, and the Apartment and Office Building Association.



OPC is in working groups such as the "Gas Procurement Group," which monitors gas supply costs. The "Guiding Principles of the Power Path DC Vision Statement" calls for the District's modern energy delivery system to be sustainable, encourage distributed

energy resources, and preserve the financial health of the utilities so that systems are safe, reliable, secure, affordable, and nondiscriminatory.



Employee Spotlight: Tracey Butler is "Fighting" for DC Consumers

High quality and responsive customer service is central to OPC's interaction with DC consumers. Tracey Butler is maintaining that standard of service. She began working for OPC as a temporary employee in March of 2022, assisting our Water Services and Litigation Services

Divisions. Eight months later, Tracey was hired as a full-time regular employee as a Program Support Specialist. She is responsible for the intake and processing of DC Water consumer complaints.

Even during Tracey's temporary tour, a consumer who was having trouble paying her water bill was lucky enough to get Tracey on the phone and commented about her experience: *"Ms. Butler was professional, courteous, empathetic, and very helpful. She took time to listen and allowed me to fully explain my unfortunate circumstances. Then she did her best to address all of my concerns."*

The native Washingtonian's educational background includes studies in nursing and law at the University of District of Columbia. Her previous career experience includes work at the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Justice.

In her leisure time, Tracey likes to attend plays and concerts. And in the tradition of the late Muhammad Ali, Tracey can "fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee." She's an amateur boxer! Tracey also can play the flute and acoustic guitar. When a consumer with a utility problem calls OPC to "cry the blues," you might say getting Tracey on the phone is like "music to their ears."

Looks Who's Celebrating Birthdays at OPC!

*Rusheeda Boyd- January 1 ~ Tracey Butler- January 3
Tameka Dodson- January 4 ~ Larry Hicks- January 9
Jason Starks- January 9 ~ Quaneisha Glover- January 21
Cheryl Morse- January 24 ~ Anthony Lee- January 27*



OPC In Your Neighborhood!

OPC looks forward to seeing you in-person. We welcome the opportunity to speak at your Advisory Neighborhood Commission, civic association or community group meeting onsite or virtually. We can give updates on utility issues, trends, and outline how we serve. Call (202) 727-3071 if your group would like our staff to make a presentation onsite or "Zoom in." Contact the organizations directly if you would like links to attend any of the meetings we'll be visiting virtually.

2023 Lunar New Year Celebration
Terrific, Inc Regional Senior Service Agency
Asian and Pacific Island Senior Center
February 6, 2023
11:00 am - 2:00 pm
899 O Street NW

National Energy and Utility Affordability Coalition (NEUAC)
Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)
Annual Education Meetings and Congressional Action Day
February 15 - February 16
Capitol Hill

Department of Aging & Community Living and Partners
Collaborative Effort with Terrific, Inc. and Habitat America
Rejoining Neighbors at the Victory Heights Apartments
February 27
11:00 am - 1:30 pm
Victory Heights
1369 Irving St NW

Photo Gallery



People's Counsel Sandra Mattavous-Frye, Public Service Commission Chairman Emile Thompson, and Deputy People's

Counsel Karen Sistrunk at the PSC's Clean Energy Summit.



OPC's Environmental and Climate Attorney Sarah Kogel-Smucker chats with Nina Dodge of DC Climate Action at the PSC Clean Energy Summit.



OPC Hispanic & Language Access Coordinator Silvia Garrick talks about OPC's services for non-and-limited English-speaking consumers at the Mayor's Office on Latino Affairs.



OPC Consumer Outreach Specialist Denise Blackson shows an OPC 2023 calendar to a visitor to the DC Department of Human Services in Ward 8. The calendar gives tips on saving energy and money on utility bills.

Connect With OPC!

Do you have feedback or an idea for an article that could be featured in an upcoming edition of the OPC Connection? We want to hear from you! Just drop our editorial team an email @ info@opc-dc.gov or tweet us [@DCOPC](https://twitter.com/DCOPC).

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