

TOWN HALL MEETING RECAP

March 2023 Power Outage Town Halls



Why did the MPSC conduct town halls on recent electricity outages?

The MPSC held three town halls to give Michiganders a chance to share directly with state regulators their experiences during and after the late February storms. The town halls also offered an opportunity for Commissioners to share about the steps the MPSC is taking to address reliability.

What were the conditions of the storm and outages that occurred in late February?

Beginning February 22, a series of winter storms, bringing with them freezing rain, ice, heavy snow and sleet, swept through Michigan causing over 700,000 customers over an 11-day period to lose power. News outlets described the initial ice storm as the worst since 1976, as some areas experienced over half an inch of ice accumulation on power lines and on the tree branches overhanging power lines. As a result, customers throughout the lower peninsula, including critical facilities such as schools,

offices, government buildings, banks, courts, libraries, airports, and senior centers, faced lengthy, multi-day, outages.

When and where did the town halls occur?

The MPSC held three town hall meetings, two of them in the areas most hard hit by the storm, and one virtual.

- The [first town hall](#) took place on Monday, March 20, 2023, from 12:00-2:30 pm (EST) in Consumers Energy's service territory at American 1 Credit Union Event Center in Tremaine Hall in Jackson.
- The [second town hall](#) took place on Monday, March 20, 2023, from 5:30-8:00 pm (EST) in DTE Electric's service territory at Fordson High School in Dearborn.
- The [third town hall](#) was a virtual event held on Tuesday, March 21, 2023, from 6:00-8:00 pm (EST) via Microsoft Teams.



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What common themes were provided at the town halls from customers?

Several common themes emerged from the comments received at the town hall meetings. Customers from both DTE Electric and Consumers Energy territories spoke about the low outage credit amount and timing of when credits would be distributed, the length of the storm related outages, the frequency of outages in their communities, reliability and safety concerns surrounding downed wires, frustration with high electricity rates, difficulty reaching the utility by phone, inaccurate and changing restoration time estimates, and poor customer service and communication provided by the utilities throughout the outages.

What is the outage credit?

The outage credit is a penalty for poor utility performance outlined in [rules](#) approved by the MPSC. The penalty, or outage credit, is paid to impacted utility customers when the utility does not meet performance standards.

The MPSC recently increased the [outage credit](#) from a single \$25 credit per event to \$35 per event with an additional \$35 per day for outages longer than outlined in the rules. The outage credit will now also be increased annually to

account for inflation. The recent rule revisions require the utility to automatically apply the credit to customers' accounts when the performance standards are not met, as opposed to the previous situation where customers needed to request the credit. The updated rules went into effect on April 10, 2023.

When will the outage credits from the February 2023 ice storms be paid?

[DTE Electric](#) has indicated it will issue outage credits to 68,000 customers following the February winter storms. The credit will be shown on the customer's bill as a "reliability credit." DTE began processing credits on March 20 and the credits will be on the next printed bill. The minimum credit amount issued by DTE is \$35 and some will receive up to \$105 for longer outages. These credits are in line with recently revised rules even though the rules were not yet in effect in February.

[Consumers Energy](#) has indicated it will issue \$25 credits automatically to all customers having an outage of 120 hours or more in line with the catastrophic guidelines in the rules that were still in effect in February. The credits from Consumers Energy will be shown as "Outage Credit – Residential" or "Outage Credit – C&I" and they will be on customer bills in April or May.

DURATION OF OUTAGES TO RECEIVE CREDITS

Condition Type	Old Rules		Revised Rules	
	Outage Length	Credit Amount	Outage Length	Credit Amount
Normal	16 hrs	\$25	16 hrs	\$35 plus \$35 for each additional day
Gray Sky			48 hrs	
Catastrophic	120 hrs	\$25	96 hrs	

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What efforts are underway to reduce the frequency of outages?

Trees and fallen tree branches are the leading cause of power outages.

Utilities have been directed by the Commission to improve their tree trimming. DTE is in the process of increasing its tree trimming cycle, or the amount of time that lapses after the trees are trimmed until they are trimmed again, from 7 years to 5 years. Areas where trees have been trimmed more frequently are seeing fewer power outages and, when outages do occur, the outages in these areas tend to be shorter than areas where the trees have not been trimmed. The MPSC has also directed Consumers Energy to increase the frequency of its tree trimming and continue progress towards achieving an effective 7-year tree trimming cycle.

In addition to pushing the utilities to improve their vegetation management, the Commission recently directed [an independent, third-party systemwide audit](#) for both DTE Electric and Consumers Energy to outline where improvements are most needed. The auditors will also consider what may be needed for the grid to withstand more frequent severe storms

and extreme weather as these types of weather events are increasing. The MPSC's [annual report](#) includes additional details on the work done by the Commission in the last year to address grid reliability.

The MPSC recently launched a new webpage that contains outage information for each storm and each utility. The MPSC has directed the Michigan utilities to supply data that will provide transparency to the public regarding electricity outages, where distribution investments are made and where the trees are trimmed more (or less) frequently. This data will be used to make informed decisions going forward.

How can the length of outages be reduced?

The majority of customers in Michigan now have newer automated meters which allow the utility to know when your power is out, allowing utilities to dispatch crews to impacted areas more quickly.

Customers with older analog meters need to contact the utility to let them know when their power is out. The [rules](#) have recently been updated (see table above) to provide an incentive for utilities to restore power more



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quickly under storm and non-storm conditions. The rule revisions also require additional reporting from utilities to provide greater transparency to the MPSC and the public.

The independent audit of DTE Electric and Consumers Energy will also identify additional opportunities to improve the utilities policies and procedures to restore power more quickly.

What else is the MPSC doing to improve resilience by exploring distributed generation solutions for customers and otherwise limit the length and consequences of outages?

The MPSC [announced](#) in Case No. U-21388 that it will hold a two-part technical conference on resilience on May 22, 2023, and May 26, 2023. The goals of this conference are to identify technologies that could improve the reliability and resilience of service to customers, especially those customers and facilities who experience disproportionate financial and health impacts during an outage and explore avenues for regulatory changes and additional funding that could enable those technologies and support our most vulnerable customers. It will

investigate distribution system investments to improve long-term reliability and climate change impacts. The technical conference will focus on potential solutions to the engineering, technical, and cost barriers associated with reliability and resilience.

The MPSC [continues to explore](#) federal funding opportunities including grid resiliency investments to assist in connecting technologies for clean energy resiliency projects that could result in improved reliability for customers.

As part of the MI Power Grid initiative, the MPSC will soon be launching a Financial Incentives and Disincentives workgroup, which will further investigate rewards and penalties tied to utility performance. This could include performance-based ratemaking to ensure that utility profits are tied to performance.

What efforts are underway to improve safety by reducing the number of downed wires?

In 2018, the MPSC conducted an investigation into DTE's performance following severe windstorms. The investigation included a focus on improving performance related to downed



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wires. That investigation resulted in a [settlement](#) which outlined improvements to be made by DTE Electric along with annual reporting. Since that time, DTE has made changes to bring performance into compliance with the older version of our rules as shown in [DTE's most recent report](#).

Downed power lines are extremely dangerous and the MPSC is committed to further improving safety. Part of the [independent audit](#) the MPSC directed of DTE Electric and Consumers Energy's systems will include an analysis of further improvements that could be made to improve the safety of the public and first responders related to downed wires.

What do I do if I see a tree branch on a wire or a wire down on the ground? What if I'm unsure if it's a power line?

If you see a downed power line, immediately notify local law enforcement by calling 9-1-1 and then call the utility. Downed power lines should always be assumed to be live even if you are unsure, stay at least 35 feet away, and don't touch anything that comes in contact with it or try to move it.

If someone comes into contact with a downed power line or something else has become electrified, call 9-1-1 immediately.

What can be done for vulnerable customers during power outages and major events?

DTE Electric and Consumers Energy assist vulnerable customers during power outages by having programs to conduct wellness checks on and deliver a limited number of backup generators to life critical customers. Many cities and local governments set up warming centers ahead of inclement weather. To find a warming center near you, visit mi211.org and search "warming centers" or call 2-1-1.

The MPSC has expanded social media and outreach efforts to educate customers regarding available assistance in advance, during, and following a major outage.

The upcoming resilience technical conference will also explore other avenues to improve the performance of the grid and provide additional support for vulnerable customers.

Why do rates keep increasing, but service quality remains the same?

Storms and extreme weather events that cause damage to utility infrastructure are on the rise. In 2019, the MPSC conducted a [Statewide Energy Assessment](#) which found that significant improvements need to be made to aging infrastructure to allow it to withstand more frequent and more severe weather events.

Over the last several years, additional investments have been made in the energy systems and operations across DTE Electric and Consumers Energy's service territories. Electricity rates have increased to pay for these investments and improvements in electricity service have been experienced by customers in the areas where these investments have been made.

There is more work that needs to be done to modernize and harden the grid, and this work will likely require additional investment in our energy systems. The MPSC is committed to ensuring that, over time, any rate increases will result in measurable benefits to customers. The independent audit of the utility distribution systems aims to identify additional investments and other changes that can be made to continue to improve utility performance to benefit customers.

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Whose responsibility is it to cut the trees in my backyard interfering with the electric line that runs to my house?

Utility companies are responsible for maintaining clearance around electric lines; however, customers are typically responsible for maintaining clearance around the service drop which typically runs from the utility pole to the home. During the line clearing process, customers in the clearance territory are notified about the work commencing and utility maintenance will clear within the utility right-of-way. If you are aware of trees interfering with electric lines at your house, contact the electric company that services your area or the MPSC for assistance.

Can I install solar on my roof? How do I get paid for the excess energy I send to the utility?

Customers can install [distributed generation](#), which is renewable energy owned by the customer. Distributed generation encompasses wind, solar, biomass, etc. Therefore, solar panels on a customer's home or roof is an option.

The MPSC has a [distributed generation program](#) for customers. If your solar produces excess generation, and it is put onto the grid, a credit can be established to compensate for the energy.

Customers had difficulty contacting the utility by phone and on the app during the storms, the estimated restoration time kept changing, and the outage maps on the website were difficult to read. What improvements to customer service will be made?

The MPSC Staff will work with the utilities to determine how to improve the capacity for answering calls as well as improving the capability of the app and website. Requests will be made to utilities to communicate more frequently and directly with customers and share those communications with us. Additional improvements to developing estimated restoration times and improving utility outage maps will be encouraged.

Customers described inaccurate bills, large balances following estimated bills and large balances for customers on payment plans. What can be done about these issues?

For assistance with billing issues, other utility issues, or to file a complaint, contact the MPSC at 1-800-292-9555. To file a complaint online visit the MPSC's website at Michigan.gov/UtilityComplaints.

