

# The Goretzka Case

## Allegheny Energy sued over Irwin woman's death

By Paul Peirce, TRIBUNE-REVIEW  
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### Lawyer wants probe of power lines after Hempfield woman's death

An attorney for a Hempfield family suing Allegheny Energy over a woman who died after electric utility lines fell onto her has filed a complaint over the utility's maintenance procedures when installing lines.

Attorney Shanin Specter of Philadelphia alleges in a letter to the state Public Utility Commission that maintenance errors uncovered in sworn depositions of several Allegheny Energy, Allegheny Power and West Penn Power employees in the ongoing lawsuit remain a danger to the public.

The problem "may cause additional lines to fall and people to die," Specter said in his complaint letter to the PUC. "This must be remedied."

Specter filed a civil lawsuit in Allegheny County over the electrocution of Carrie Goretzka, 39, in June 2009. She was trapped under a fallen power line outside her West Hempfield Drive home in view of her mother-in-law and two daughters, Chloe, then 4, and Carlie, then 2.

Goretzka, who had burns over 85 percent of her body, died three days later in UPMC Mercy hospital, Pittsburgh.

According to Specter, maintenance workers testified they were trained to clean power lines with knives and other tools, instead of wire brushes, which the attorney and the power line's manufacturer contend is the only way to keep the lines from failing.

Specter said the problems can occur where the lines are spliced.

"Over time, these wires tend to oxidize at the connections, causing arcing to occur. The lines become overheated and eventually fail and fall," Specter said.

PUC spokeswoman Jennifer Kocher said the agency that oversees utilities received Specter's complaint last week, and it is investigating.

"The complaint has been forwarded to the PUC's bureau of investigations and enforcement," Kocher said.

She added that there is no timetable for completion of the investigation.

"The investigation is in its infancy," she said.

West Penn spokesman Joe Cerenzia issued a statement from the company:

"While our sympathy certainly goes out to Carrie Goretzka's family, we cannot comment due to the ongoing litigation," Cerenzia said.

Specter alleges in the lawsuit that the utility was negligent in the installation and maintenance of the power lines. He said that he opted to pursue a formal complaint with the PUC, which oversees state utilities, because the sworn testimony of the Allegheny Energy trainers and linemen in recent months concerning the maintenance indicated it could pose a public hazard "in Southwestern Pennsylvania."

Specter said the manufacturer of the splice testified that using a knife or other similar tool to clean rust from the conductors is inadequate.

"The representative of the manufacturer used the analogy: 'We don't use a knife to brush our teeth.' In other words, the knife can't get into the grooves of the wires," Specter said.

Specter said his complaint asks the PUC to order the utility to test the safety of the splices from the ground and correct similar, poorly installed lines "so this tragedy is not repeated." The complaint asks that the utility retrain its linemen.