

Met-Ed fined \$1M in settlement with state over Northampton County electrocution

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Metropolitan Edison Co. agreed to over \$16 million in improvements and a \$1 million fine in a settlement with state utility regulators over a 2016 electrocution death in Northampton County.

The Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission approved the settlement Thursday with Met-Ed, a FirstEnergy Corp. electricity provider, in the death of 31-year-old Thomas Poynton Jr.

The PUC's independent Bureau of Investigation & Enforcement (I&E) alleged that on July 26, 2016, a Met-Ed high-voltage conductor fell into the backyard of the Royal Manor Road home in Williams Township where Poynton lived with his wife and their daughter, then 20 months old.

Poynton stepped outside after hearing a loud explosion and was electrocuted when he stepped on energized ground, according to investigators. The failure of the conductor also led to a fire that damaged the Poyntons' home, the investigation found. One of the family's two dogs in the yard at the time died, as well.

"Based on the investigation by I&E's electric safety engineers, the complaint alleged that Met-Ed and its contractors used a series of 'bronze hotline clamps' attached to the 34,500 volt transmission lines near the incident site – including the conductor that fell to the ground – which were intended for copper conductors, rather than the aluminum lines they were attached to," the PUC said in a statement on the settlement.

"This was contrary to the manufacturer's recommendations and FirstEnergy's (Met-Ed's parent company) material specifications. Also, the company allegedly did not have procedures for the installation of the bronze hotline clamps.

"The complaint also alleged that on the day of the incident, Met-Ed's ground fault protection system ultimately failed, allowing the continued flow of electricity to the conductor after it fell to the ground."

A member of Poynton's family declined to comment to lehighvalleylive.com on Thursday about the settlement.'

Poynton was a teacher and coach at Palisades High School in Bucks County. His wife, Sarah, and mother-in-law, Marianne Rush, sued Met-Ed and FirstEnergy in September 2016 over the death. **That suit was settled in 2018, according to attorney Shanin Specter, who did not disclose the terms.**

“We applaud the PUC for obtaining meaningful safety measures to make all Pennsylvanians less likely to be victimized by an improperly installed and maintained power line,” Specter said Thursday. “We can’t bring Mr. Poynton back, but this remedial action permits something good to come from his tragic passing.”

The PUC’s decision was a 4-0 vote to adopt an Initial Decision by Administrative Law Judge Mary D. Long, which accepts a Joint Petition for Approval of Settlement between Met-Ed and Bureau of Investigation & Enforcement.

Under the settlement, according to the PUC, Met-Ed agrees to:

- Over \$16 million in remediation measures: Implementation includes a new company program for the inspection and replacement of hotline clamps across its entire primary system, as well as enhancements to Met-Ed’s construction standards, inspection processes and safety standards; additional training for Met-Ed employees and company contractors; and a thorough review of the company’s emergency response preparedness.
- A \$150,000 contribution to the company’s hardship fund, which provides grants to qualifying customers.
- Payment of a \$1 million civil penalty. This is not tax deductible and may not be passed through to Met-Ed’s Pennsylvania customers.

Met-Ed spokesman Todd Meyers on Thursday told lehighvalleylive.com: “Working collaboratively with the Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement, we have reached an outcome that we believe includes measures that are driven to enhance the safety of our system and operations for the public, our customers, and our employees alike.”

Annually, an average of 24 serious injuries and six deaths occur in Pennsylvania involving individuals working around utility company power lines, according to the PUC. The commission in 2014 formed an Electric Safety Division to boost the safety of those in close proximity to power lines, including utility employees, contractors, construction workers and residents.