

May 25, 2016

**VIA EMAIL**

Laurel Ross  
Acting Commission Secretary  
BC Utilities Commission  
6th Floor 900 Howe Street  
Vancouver, BC V6Z 2N3



Reply to: Erin Pritchard  
epritchard@bcpiac.com  
Ph: 604-687-3044

Our file: 7615

Dear Ms. Ross:

**Re: BC Hydro 2015 Rate Design Application Module 1  
Evidence of BCOAPO *et al.* – Direct Testimony of Keith Simmonds**

It has come to our attention that the Direct Testimony of Keith Simmonds, filed as part of BCOAPO's evidence (Exhibit C2-12, Tab 10), failed to include the two attachments referenced therein.

We attach the complete Direct Testimony of Keith Simmonds, including referenced Attachments A & B. As the attachments are very brief, and are substantially similar in content to the body of Mr. Simmonds' testimony, we trust that no party will be prejudiced by the delay; however, we apologize for any inconvenience due to this inadvertent omission.

Should you have any questions, please let us know.

Sincerely,

**BC Public Interest Advocacy Centre**

Erin Pritchard  
Barrister and Solicitor

c. Tom Loski, Chief Regulatory Officer, BC Hydro  
Registered participants

Encl.

**Before the British Columbia Utilities Commission**

British Columbia Hydro And  
Power Authority 2015 Rate  
Design Application )  
)  
) BCUC Project No.3698781  
)  
)

**Direct Testimony of Keith Simmonds**

**on behalf of:**

**British Columbia Old Age Pensioners' Organization, Active Support Against Poverty, BC Poverty Reduction Coalition, Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of BC, Disability Alliance BC, Together Against Poverty Society, and The Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre (BCOAPO *et al.*)**

**May 9, 2016**

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**1. What is your job description?**

I am the Coordinating Minister at Duncan United Church in Duncan, BC. I work with a staff of 8 other people, including one staff member (Social Justice Coordinator) who regularly works directly with low income people, and a couple of others who assist with people who are engaged with government services. I am also the Chair of the BC Conference of the United Church of Canada.

As our church is located downtown, I regularly personally interact with people who come through our door – this includes a lot of people who rely on government services.

**2. What is your client demographic?**

Our “client” demographic could include basically anyone in the community; however, our outreach services are targeted at marginalized, low income people—often people who are homeless or on verge of homelessness. Of those who are housed, the majority are renters, and some are homeowners.

Most of our clients rely on income assistance or persons with disabilities benefits from the BC Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation (MSDSI) or social assistance on reserve as their sole source of income. Others are low income workers. We also work with seniors and with families – we see a lot of single mothers.

Our services extend well beyond members of the church—the vast majority of the people we assist are not congregants.

**3. What is the reason for your familiarity with bill affordability issues for low income BC Hydro ratepayers?**

I am familiar with bill affordability issues for low income BC Hydro ratepayers because we regularly receive direct requests for help from people with BC Hydro issues.

Our church has always had a tradition to try to help people, and I am well aware that the amount provided by provincial welfare and social assistance on reserve is not enough to cover bills, including utility bills.

Duncan United Church is also a receiving agency for people who make applications for assistance with Social Planning Cowichan. Social Planning Cowichan provides limited one-time grants for people who need help paying their rent and utility bills. I will elaborate on these grants below.

**4. How long have you been working on BC Hydro low income issues?**

I have been in my current capacity for 2.5 years, and have seen BC Hydro bill affordability issues throughout that time. I have been a minister since 2009; prior to my current role, I was a minister in Trail, BC. Part of my work has always been with marginalized, low income people.

I would estimate that I see about 10-15 people with BC Hydro-related issues per month. Our Social Justice Coordinator sees someone almost every day concerning BC Hydro issues. It is part of our mandate to help people with these problems.

Over the past year and a half, contacts about BC Hydro have increased—especially contacts from people who cannot afford to pay their Hydro bills. Since I spoke out in a local newspaper (Cowichan Valley Citizen) about increasing BC Hydro rates and the hardships these increases are causing low income people and families, more people have been getting in touch with us about their BC Hydro issues. The article based on the letter I wrote can be found at **Attachment A**.

**5. What types of BCH issues have you dealt with?**

We tend to hear from people when they have been disconnected or are facing disconnection. We also hear from people who have received large BC Hydro bills that they cannot pay—for example, people who are facing a large and unexpected bill following an Equal Payment Plan true-up.

## **6. What is the impact of BC Hydro bill affordability issues on your clients?**

Inability to pay rising Hydro costs has a huge impact on low income people. Many people have to choose between paying rent, purchasing food, and paying their BC Hydro bill. Seniors with pensions that seemed adequate in the past cannot afford current BC Hydro rates, nor can those living on provincial and on reserve welfare rates that have been frozen since 2007. I am aware of people being evicted because they were not able to pay for heat in their rented accommodation. Affordable rental housing is often also the least energy efficient, and the hardest to heat. Affordable rental accommodation in our area can be poorly insulated, drafty, and heated by older, inefficient baseboards that either fail or need to be supplemented by portable heat sources. Some people have even told me they use oven elements to help heat their homes.

We also see parents who fear their children may be taken into care because they cannot afford electricity to heat their home or refrigerate food. In the region where I live and work, a particularly high number of kids are apprehended by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). I understand that lack of electricity could lead MCFD to consider removing children from a home if the weather is cold for a longer period of time and the children's parents or guardians could not afford to pay their electricity bill.

Another issue is that people around here live in rural areas where housing is more affordable and wood heat is more of an option—those people often use electric pumps for drinking water. When BC Hydro disconnects these households, people are left without drinking water.

One case we recently saw involved a woman who is on income assistance and could not afford her BC Hydro bill. MSDSI would not assist her with a crisis supplement, and Cowichan Social Planning had no funds available to assist her. She would risk eviction from her rental housing if her electricity was disconnected. She found a new place to rent, but MSDSI would not assist her with a security deposit as she was still housed at the time of request.

In my experience, once a low income person's power is disconnected, it is very difficult for them to get reconnected. Not only do they have to deal with the outstanding bill, but they have to find a way to pay the reconnection fee and potentially a security deposit on top of that.

I wrote a letter to the Honourable Bill Bennett, Minister of Energy and Mines, outlining the impact of BC Hydro bill affordability issues on the low income people in my community. A copy of my letter to Minister Bennett can be found at **Attachment B**.

**7. Are you and your clients aware of upcoming BC Hydro rate increases?**

I am aware of the upcoming BC Hydro rate increases. The clients we work with are vaguely aware, but it is difficult to keep on top of that kind of thing when your immediate concerns are feeding and housing yourself and your family.

Low income people we see will absolutely be unable to cope with increases in BC Hydro rates without receiving a discount on their electricity bills or a corresponding increase in income (income assistance and disability assistance, and minimum wage).

**8. What have you heard about BC Hydro's Low Income Demand Side Measures (Energy Efficiency) Programs?**

I have heard of the Energy Savings Kits, but they are not something we hear a lot about from clients. I do not think most people are aware of them, and the savings BC Hydro suggests the items could provide seem like an overstatement. I spoke to one person who received an energy savings kit and installed all of the items, and he said it made no difference to his bill.

I have not really heard about the Energy Conservation Assistance Program.

**9. Are there any sources of financial assistance with BC Hydro bills?**

In terms of financial assistance with BC Hydro bills, people who are on income assistance or disability assistance can request crisis supplements from MSDSI, but this is not a reliable source of funding – many requests are denied. The Ministry often tells people they are not having a crisis—imagine being a single mom and being told that an inability to pay your bill is your own failure in planning.

If someone is ineligible for help with their BC Hydro bill from MSDSI, they can ask us for help through the Cowichan Social Planning fund. A person is eligible to receive these emergency funds only once per year (if at all), to a maximum of \$200, so it is quite limited who can actually get help with their bill this way. Also, the amount in this fund is limited to \$1000 total each month to assist people in the area with both rent and utilities, and always runs out in first few days of the month. The fund does not provide a solution for people that come in with BC Hydro issues later in the month.

On reserve lands nearby, I believe that the band has some funds available to assist people on reserve.

There are no other sources of assistance that I am aware of – if none of these sources can help, people are on their own.

With the help of an advocate, clients may be able to negotiate repayment with BC Hydro in order to get reconnected, but this is not consistent – it depends who at BC Hydro answers the phone. Supervisors seem to have more ability to accommodate low income customers, but front line workers appear to be limited in what they can do. Low income clients are unlikely to get through to a supervisor on their own. Most people in deep distress are not their best advocates. A person has to demand a supervisor, and, in my experience, some front line staff can sound harsh, blame the customer, and can almost be abusive in their treatment of callers. Marginalized people who are already at the mercy of an authority's decision-making may not be assertive enough to request a supervisor, who may also treat them poorly. This comes from my direct, personal experience dealing with BC Hydro Customer Service Representatives, that of our Social Justice Coordinator, and out of the reported experience of people that seek help from our church. In my experience, BC Hydro is not willing to look at customers' unexpectedly high power bills for problems (e.g. meter issues) unless the customer is willing to pay the meter testing charges.



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by Sarah Simpson - Cowichan Valley Citizen  
posted Dec 18, 2015 at 8:00 AM



Duncan United Church minister Keith Simmonds.  
— Image Credit: Citizen File

A Duncan minister is sounding alarms after the recent influx of people to his church seeking relief due to the seemingly ever-increasing BC Hydro rates.

Minister Keith Simmonds painted a bleak picture, this week, of a situation becoming all too frequently told to staff at Duncan United Church.

“Imagine being a single parent, struggling on minimum wage, faced with an unexpectedly high hydro bill because Hydro seems unable to get the equal payment calculation right. If your power is cut off you can no longer heat your home, or refrigerate your food. Cooking is problematic too. You might be forgiven for worrying about interactions with social services, as your children no longer have access to any of the services electricity makes possible,” Simmonds said.

“Imagine you’ve communicated that to BC Hydro and imagine they cut you off anyway, next demanding a hefty deposit (sometimes twice the bill) and a hefty connection fee

(sometimes as much as the bill) before they’ll grant you access to power again.

“Imagine going to welfare for help and being told you are not having a crisis, you’re having a planning problem and to go out and beg for help from churches, because your lack of planning is not the government’s problem. Maybe you should have spent more time at the food bank, and less in the grocery store?”

It’s happening, Simmonds said.

And not just to single parents but to pensioners, low wage earners and others as well.

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It's not a case isolated to our community either, he said. It's happening in cities, on reserves, in rural areas and beyond.

"Some while ago we decided we would no longer treat Hydro as an essential service. We decided it should be a money earner instead," he said. "Some time ago we decided the company we owned and the government we operate should treat men, women and children, parents and grandparents without care or compassion or decency."

Simmonds wants to see that change.

He's calling on the community now to get in touch with MLA Bill Routley and ask that he demand change in Victoria.

"I know the official opposition would see this as a headline issue and would not let up until the government did," Simmonds said.

Routley's constituency assistant Doug Morgan said Routley is planning on speaking on the issue at the Legislature but scheduling prevents him from doing so until the spring.

Morgan said Routley is well aware of the problem and that it's one of the most common issues people coming to the office have.

"We're seeing this a lot," Morgan said.

Increasingly, women with children are being affected. Morgan handles most of the complaints.

"Since I've been dealing with this over the last six years here, this is the worst I've seen it. The rates are going up and more and more people are being pushed off the plate towards homelessness," Morgan said. "I've got people phoning and saying they're living with a camp stove and a lantern and their freezers are done because they can't afford to hook up again."

Morgan said he understands the United Church has been doing everything it can to help people but "it just got swamped," he said.

Routley wasn't available for comment but Morgan said he will be prepared when it comes time to head back down to Victoria.

"He's going to have a speech on BC Hydro and homelessness and that related area but we can't get him in until spring now," Monroe said.

We encourage an open exchange of ideas on this story's topic, but we ask you to follow our guidelines for respecting community standards. Personal attacks, inappropriate language, and off-topic comments may be removed, and comment privileges revoked, per our Terms of Use. Please see our FAQ if you have questions or concerns about using Facebook to comment.

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The United Church of Canada

# Duncan United Church

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Minister: Keith Simmonds  
Administration & Social Justice Ministry: Linda Evans  
Music Director: Connie Masson

March 17, 2016

Honourable Bill Bennett  
Minister of Energy and Mines  
PO Box 9060 Stn Prov. Gov't  
Victoria BC V8W 9E3

Dear Mr. Bennett,

I am writing you to request that you offer direct assistance to low income parents, children, seniors and others affected by BC Hydro's rates for household power consumption. Our church is constantly approached by many people in our community and throughout the Cowichan Valley who are struggling with BC Hydro. Some have been issued disconnect notices, some have been disconnected, all are in a state of high anxiety as they are faced with choices between rent, groceries, and their hydro bill.

Parents are worried about losing their children to the care of the Provincial Government's foster care system. Independent seniors are worried about having to access the Provincial Government's health care system and/or seniors facilities much sooner than previously anticipated, and marginalized individuals are worried about becoming homeless and having to access the Provincial Government's Shelter Program. Independently functioning rural residents are worried about losing access to irrigation water and becoming dependent on the Provincial Government's social welfare system. In most cases the support offered by the Province to those folk affected by their inability to pay BC Hydro rates will far exceed any benefits that the Provincial Government might reap from BC Hydro's contributions.

Folk at our church hope that you will be able to direct BC Hydro to develop a rate scheme that takes these factors into consideration. Please do what you can to ensure that parents, children, seniors, low wage workers and others can continue living as productive, contributing members of society. Reducing the rates BC Hydro charges the poorest among us, and insisting on a disconnect strategy that considers every effect on the Provincial budget would go a long way towards that goal.

Thank you for taking the time to review this letter and for doing what you can to help all British Columbians benefit from the services offered by your ministry.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keith Simmonds".

Keith Simmonds, diaconal minister, Duncan United Church  
Cc: Honourable Christy Clark, Premier, Province of British Columbia