

Pepco says vulnerable customers should have backup plan

Montgomery County Council members want assistance for special-needs patients

By Margie Hyslop | Staff Writer

Customers who rely on electrically powered medical equipment are responsible for having a backup plan to keep it running when power goes out, Pepco's regional head said today.

"They have to have make plans for things individually or through their caretakers," Thomas Graham, the utility's regional president, told a joint meeting of the Montgomery County Council's Health and Human Services and Public Safety committees.

"To suggest that we take resources to move around and connect emergency generators would distract us from what we do," Graham said. "If they have a medical emergency, we suggest they call 911."

Graham said extraordinarily sudden and severe weather was responsible for long outages this summer, not Pepco's documented low reliability — which is well below the median for other utilities nationally and in Maryland — in normal conditions.

"It would be nice if it was a shared burden to fill the gap," Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park said, referring to the predicament of some medically vulnerable residents who believed power restoration to their homes would get priority.

After a series of exchanges Thursday with Pepco officials that council members described as "talking past each other" and that underscored criticism that the utility fails to communicate well with its customers, Councilman George Leventhal suggested that information the utility distributes to "special needs customers" misleads them into thinking that they will get special consideration.

In fact, said Donna Mann, who manages Pepco's processes for customer satisfaction, when customers sign up for the "Emergency Medical Equipment Notification Program," which requires them to get a physician's certification, Pepco simply mails them information on how to be prepared and sends them automated phone calls to warn of outages when they are anticipated.

Some council members said they would recommend to state regulators that special-needs patients be given the option of waiving some medical privacy provisions so that the county could know they might need help when the power goes out.