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CONSUMER WATCH

Oak Park woman stuck paying for neighbor's electricity

Utility makes light of woman's complaints

Jon Yates

What's Your Problem?

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Linda Webb was pretty sure her electric bills were wrong. For years her usage would inexplicably spike, even when she turned off the lights or sweltered in the summer heat.

When she called ComEd to complain, she was told her bill was accurate.

"I didn't really pay any attention because when I'd call, they'd just pooh-pooh me and say, 'You know, Ma'am, rates went up,' " Webb said.

This winter, Webb reached her boiling point. The disabled Oak Park resident said the bills for her small apartment climbed beyond what she could afford — \$81 one month, \$77 the next.

Webb, who lives on monthly Supplemental Security Income checks, did a little checking and realized the meter on her electric bill belonged to the apartment upstairs.

Again she called ComEd, which promised to send out a technician to verify the mistake. When the technician failed to show for the appointment, she had friends e-mail What's Your Problem?

"I'm handicapped and I live on a certain amount of money, and I know how much I can spend," Webb said. "I'm sitting in the dark. I don't even use electricity at night because I'm afraid to run up my bill."

The Problem Solver called ComEd spokeswoman Kim Morris-Johnson, who promised to look into the matter. Within days, a ComEd technician visited Webb's apartment complex and confirmed her meter had been switched with a neighbor's.

Webb said she thinks the switch occurred more than four years ago, when the number on her bill changed.

Jim Chilsen, spokesman for the Citizens Utility Board, said that under state rules, when an error is made



to the customer's detriment, the refund has to be made to the date when the error first occurred.

But another state regulation says utilities only have to keep records going back two years.

ComEd recalculated Webb's bill dating back to March 2007 and found she had overpaid by \$446. Morris-Johnson said the electric company will send her a check for that amount.

"I hope this customer feels this issue was resolved to her satisfaction," Morris-Johnson said.

Well, almost.

While she's pleased the issue is resolved, Webb said she still feels she's getting shortchanged.

"I really didn't get all my money back, I don't think," she said. "I really don't trust the electric company at all."

HAVE A PROBLEM? E-mail your story, providing as many details as possible, to yourproblem@tribune.com or write to What's Your Problem?, Newsroom, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611. Please include your name and a way to contact you. We cannot respond to everyone, but we'll get to as many as we can and publish the results Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays.

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