



CONSUMER AFFAIRS BRANCH

SECOND QUARTER REPORT

AUGUST 2021



**California Public
Utilities Commission**

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About This Report

This quarterly report highlights consumer issues related to communications, electric, natural gas, and water utilities regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission.

Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this report are based on inquiries and complaints received by the Consumer Affairs Branch (CAB) from April through June 2021.

This report details:

- [CAB Returned More Than \\$234,000 to Consumers in the Second Quarter of 2021](#)
- [CAB Assisted More Than 1,400 Consumers with Resolving Utility Complaints in the Second Quarter of 2021](#)
- [Consumer Contacts Have Remained Steady](#)
- [Southern California Edison Accounts for the Most Contacts Related to Billing Issues](#)

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About the Consumer Affairs Branch

The Consumer Affairs Branch (CAB) resides within the News and Outreach Office at the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). CAB is responsible for supporting the needs of consumers. CAB provides the following services:

- Resolves consumer questions or complaints about their regulated communications, natural gas, electric, and water utility services.
- Resolves appeals for California LifeLine, a discounted phone program.
- Administers Limited English Proficiency (LEP) programs that assist consumers with telecommunications and energy issues.
- Analyzes complaint data to assist CPUC decision-makers, support enforcement against fraud and abuse and inform the public.

CAB Returned More Than \$234,000 to Consumers This Quarter

In the second quarter of 2021, consumers were reimbursed **\$234,601** from the utilities by reaching out to CAB and utilizing the Informal Complaint process. Many of the refunds were the result of incorrect billing and were disbursed at the discretion of the utility following CAB’s involvement.

TABLE 1. CONSUMER REFUNDS BY INDUSTRY¹ AND QUARTER

| Industry | 2020 | | 2021 | |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Third Quarter | Fourth Quarter | First Quarter | Second Quarter |
| Communications | \$ 153,103 | \$ 101,246 | \$ 112,017 | \$ 95,549 |
| Energy | \$ 234,399 | \$ 134,570 | \$ 508,292 | \$ 135,992 |
| Water | \$ 7,144 | \$ 4,572 | \$ 13,764 | \$ 3,060 |
| Totals | \$ 394,646 | \$ 240,388 | \$ 634,073 | \$ 234,601 |

¹ This table only accounts for refunds through the Informal Complaint process. Cases where a phone contact was transferred to a utility for expedited resolution are not reflected here.

Second Quarter Consumer Refund Highlights

- ❖ California Water Service Company replaced a customer’s meter and credited the customer **\$364.62** after several inaccurate meter readings.
- ❖ A Southern California Edison customer received a credit of **\$10,192.17** due to the utility’s billing errors.
- ❖ CAB’s representatives assisted a small business with a settlement compromise and credit adjustment with TPX Communications for **\$13,395.20**.

CAB Assisted More Than 1,400 Consumers with Resolving Utility Complaints in the Second Quarter of 2021

CAB’s Informal Complaint process allows consumers an easily accessible way to resolve disputes with their utility. In contrast to the CPUC’s Formal Complaint process, the Informal Complaint process does not require a formal proceeding or Administrative Law Judge oversight.

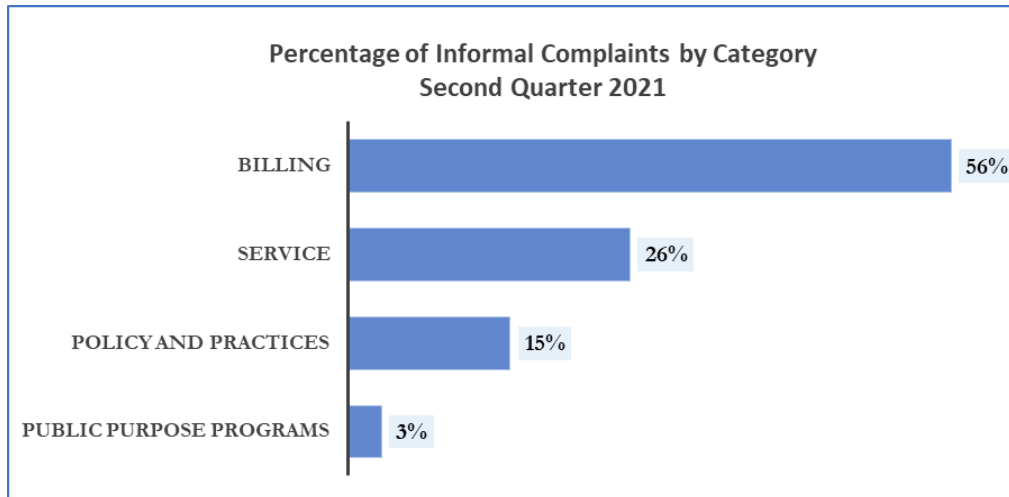
Including the Informal Complaints that resulted in refunds for consumers, CAB resolved **1,413** Informal Complaints in the second quarter of 2021.

TABLE 2. INFORMAL CONSUMER COMPLAINTS RESOLVED, BY INDUSTRY AND QUARTER

| Industry | 2020 | | 2021 | |
|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|
| | Third Quarter | Fourth Quarter | First Quarter | Second Quarter |
| Communications | 629 | 487 | 694 | 458 |
| Energy | 633 | 522 | 700 | 904 |
| Water | 43 | 58 | 55 | 51 |
| Totals | 1,305 | 1,067 | 1,449 | 1,413 |

Many consumers have been assisted by CAB’s Informal Complaint process, particularly when it comes to billing issues. Across all industries, **56** percent of all Informal Complaints resolved were identified as billing issues, followed by service issues at **26** percent; see Chart 1 below.

CHART 1. INFORMAL CONSUMER COMPLAINTS BY CATEGORY, SECOND QUARTER 2021



TEAM and CHANGES

In addition to the informal contacts handled by CAB, the Telecommunications Education and Assistance in Multiple-Languages ([TEAM](#)) and Community Help and Awareness of Natural Gas and Electric Services ([CHANGES](#)) programs overseen by CAB assist Limited English Proficient (LEP) consumers with telecommunications and energy issues, respectively.

Support is provided statewide through **27** Community Based Organizations (CBOs) that work with LEP consumers in their preferred language with cultural sensitivity. The programs provide consumer outreach, education, needs assistance, and dispute resolution.

In the second quarter of 2021, approximately **2,775** consumers were offered individual case support from CBO staff for a related need (e.g., CARE/LifeLine or other financial assistance) or a utility dispute. This represents an increase of **26** percent from the previous quarter and an increase of **78** percent compared to the historical low point for the program of **1,560** cases, which occurred in the third quarter of 2020. On behalf of consumers, TEAM CBOs were able to recover **\$34,319** from telecommunications companies.

Demand for education services rebounded in this quarter with **9,677** consumers educated on a range of topics² intended to assist them in managing their utility services, an increase of more than **77** percent compared to the previous quarter.

² <https://www.cpuc.ca.gov/about-cpuc/divisions/news-and-public-information-office/consumer-affairs-branch/team-and-changes-programs> (see heading “Educational Brochures in Different Languages”)

Consumer Contacts Have Remained Steady

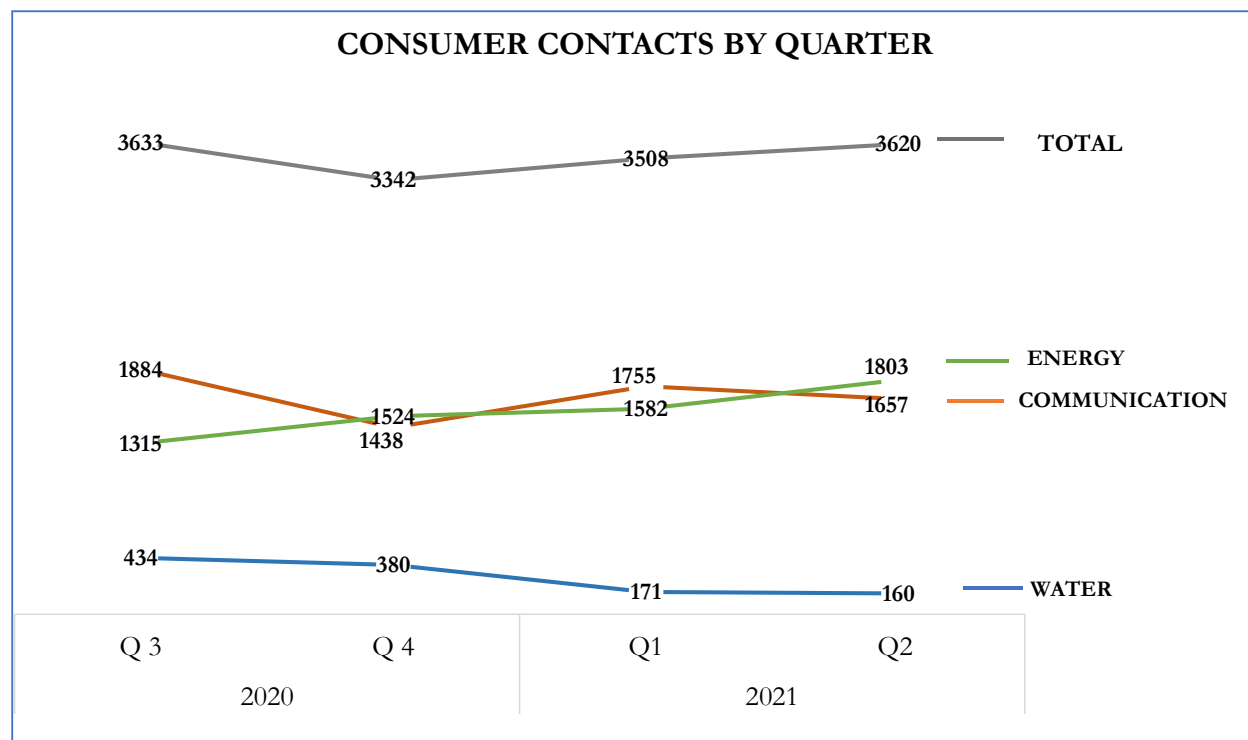
CAB’s team of representatives are responsible for assisting consumers with answering questions and resolving disputes with their utility providers. These contacts, which include Informal Complaints, are received via phone calls, letters, or the Internet. In the second quarter of 2021, CAB received **3,620** contacts; see Table 3.

TABLE 3. NUMBER OF CONSUMER CONTACTS, BY INDUSTRY, SECOND QUARTER 2021

| | |
|----------------|--------------|
| Communications | 1,657 |
| Energy | 1,803 |
| Water | 160 |
| Total | 3,620 |

Contacts remained steady over the last four quarters (see Chart 2. Consumer Contacts by Industry and by Quarter). In general, the stabilization of consumer contacts is attributed to consumer protections enacted by the CPUC and other governmental agencies.

CHART 2. CONSUMER CONTACTS BY INDUSTRY AND BY QUARTER



Billing issues accounted for **44** percent of the contacts across all industries, with the High Bill subcategory at **22** percent. Service issues accounted for **18** percent of all contacts with **10** percent of service issues attributed to the subcategory Delayed Orders/Missed Appointments.

Southern California Accounts for the Most Contacts Related to Billing Issues

Southern California Edison’s (SCE) billing issues were a focus in CAB’s 2020 2nd Quarter Report. That report showed that SCE accounted for **22** percent of all billing-related complaints within the energy sector. In this report, we again focus on SCE and their billing issues, as their percentage of billing-related complaints increased to **29** percent in the second quarter of 2021.

Following the implementation of its Customer Service Re-Platform (CSRP) in early April 2021, SCE identified issues with billing delays, extended wait times to reach the call center, system slowness and outages affecting different customer base segments at various times and locations. SCE-related customer contacts increased, as reflected in Table 4, below.

TABLE 4. SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA EDISON'S CONTACTS BY CATEGORY, 1ST & 2ND QUARTERS 2021

| Category | Q1-2021 | Q2-2021 | Quarter to Quarter Change |
|----------------------------------|------------|------------|---------------------------|
| Billing | 357 | 611 | 71% |
| Non-Regulated-Non-Jurisdictional | 42 | 197 | 369% |
| Policy & Practices | 62 | 22 | -64.50% |
| Public Purpose Programs | 52 | 56 | 7.70% |
| Rates | 4 | 6 | 50% |
| Service | 144 | 71 | -50.70% |
| Total | 661 | 963 | 45.7% |

The notable increase in Non-Regulated contacts for the 2nd quarter of 2021 is due to consumer complaints about the extended hold times to reach an SCE service representative in their call center or interacting with the utility website when accessing account information.

Policy and Practices contacts decreased due to fewer contacts about Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS) events. SCE customers were not subject to any PSPS events in the 2nd Quarter. The decrease in Service complaints stems from fewer weather-related issues with the rainy season virtually over. CAB participates in regular meetings with SCE, since implementation of the SCE billing system in April, to review the system issues. We actively monitor the closure of the billing issues and follow up on the status as needed.