



# Consumer Affairs Branch

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FOURTH QUARTER REPORT-2023

February 21, 2024



**California Public  
Utilities Commission**

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

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This quarterly report highlights consumer issues related to telecommunications, electric, natural gas, water, and transportation service providers regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). Unless otherwise noted, the data presented in this report are based on inquiries and complaints received by the Consumer Affairs Branch (CAB) from October through December 2023.

## THIS REPORT DETAILS Q4-2023 HIGHLIGHTS:

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- [CAB Returned More Than \\$780,667 to Consumers in the Q4-2023](#)
- [CAB Received 7,395 Consumer Contacts](#)
- [CAB Assisted About 2,998 Consumers Resolve Complaints](#)

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## ABOUT THE CONSUMER AFFAIRS BRANCH

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The Consumer Affairs Branch (CAB) resides within the External Affairs Division at the CPUC. CAB is responsible for supporting the diverse needs of consumers. CAB provides the following services:

- Resolves consumer questions or complaints about their regulated telecommunications, 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 contact data to assist CPUC decision-makers, supports enforcement against fraud and abuse and informs the public.

## CONSUMER REFUNDS – CAB RETURNED \$780,667 TO CONSUMERS

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During Q4-2023, consumers were reimbursed **\$780,667** from the utilities by reaching out to CAB and utilizing the Informal Complaint (IC) process. An IC is a written consumer contact expressing dissatisfaction

with or a dispute with an action or practice that is regulated through tariffs, rules, orders, or any other form of authority that originates from the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC).<sup>1</sup>

Many of the refunds were the result of incorrect billing and were disbursed by the utility following CAB’s involvement. The average refunded amount from the utility to consumer in Q4 by industry: Telecommunications **\$609**, Energy **\$1,445**, Transportation **\$165**, and Water **\$573**.

**Table 1: Consumer Refunds by Industry<sup>2</sup> and Quarter**

Industry	Q1 2023	Q2 2023	Q3 2023	Q4 2023
Energy	\$5,750,980	\$400,065	\$639,504	\$609,939
Telecommunications	\$94,673	\$146,110	\$142,225	\$157,702
Transportation	n/a	n/a	\$50	\$987
Water	\$18,408	\$22,037	\$17,940	\$12,039
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$688,161</b>	<b>\$568,212</b>	<b>\$799,719</b>	<b>\$780,667</b>

**Table 2: Q4 2023 Consumer Refund Statistics**

Industry	Count of Refunds	Avg. Refund Amount	Min. Refund Amount	Max. Refund Amount	Total Refund Amount
<b>Energy</b>	422	\$1,445	\$0	\$43,692	\$609,939
<b>Telecommunications</b>	260	\$607	\$4	\$15,033	\$157,702
<b>Transportation</b>	6	\$165	\$10	\$856	\$987
<b>Water</b>	21	\$573	\$4	\$2,952	\$12,039
<b>Total</b>	<b>709</b>	<b>\$1,101</b>	<b>\$0</b>	<b>\$43,692</b>	<b>\$780,667</b>

## FOURTH QUARTER REFUND HIGHLIGHTS

*AT&T California – Service Outage* CAB received a complaint from an elderly customer of AT&T who stated he had no phone service for over two weeks despite repeated calls for repair. The customer is 89 years old and relies on the telephone in the event of emergencies. The customer resides in zip code 90032, which is in the 84<sup>th</sup> ESJ percentile. The customer’s last conversation with AT&T service center indicated that the phone would be repaired by September 13, 2023, however, AT&T missed the repair

<sup>1</sup> In comparison to an IC, the CPUC has a Formal Complaint (FC) process. A FC is a written legal document that claims a utility regulated by the CPUC has violated state laws or the CPUC’s orders or rules. A FC describes these violations, the injury suffered, because of them, and the resolution requested from the CPUC and is overseen by an Administrative Law Judge. CAB focuses on ICs and presents results of Q1 in this report.

<sup>2</sup> This table only accounts for refunds through the IC process. Cases where a phone contact was transferred to a utility for expedited resolution are not reflected here.

date, and the customer remained without phone service. It took AT&T almost 2 months to resolve the outage situation.

AT&T investigated and determined the customer's AT&T traditional home phone service was impacted by an outage that was resolved on 11/07/2023. AT&T applied two out-of-service adjustments of \$47.47 and \$71.42 to the customer's account on 10/05/2023 and 11/09/2023, respectively.

- *Greenwave Energy - Abusive Marketing* - A PG&E customer was contacted by a door-to-door salesperson for Greenwave Energy (Greenwave) who offered them a lower electric rate, compared to what PG&E was billing them. The customer agreed to the lower rate as they needed to save money but did not qualify for any income-based programs. Greenwave set the rate at \$1.40 per therm in January, when they signed up, and this rate was applied to their February bill. However, on the same statement, there was also a rate of \$4.99 per therm, although they were advised verbally that there would be no increase guaranteed in the first 30 days. The customer was concerned that they were lied to, and now their bill was so high that they were having even more difficulty making the required payments. In addition to not saving any money, an additional \$519.28 in February was incurred on top of the PG&E bill and an additional \$189.98 in March. When the customer called to cancel, a Greenwave rep told her she could not cancel until she filed a dispute, hence the higher March bill.

When the customer contacted PG&E, she was told she had to speak to Greenwave and vice versa. The customer was informed by a Greenwave rep that she could dispute and have a manager call her back within 30 days from Greenwave after a decision on the dispute was made. A manager called the customer back a month later and said the rate was due to an increase, and they were sorry but couldn't do anything other than remove her from the program. The customer was removed from Greenwave's program, and she contacted PG&E to see what she could do and was informed she could dispute through CPUC. Greenwave confirmed service was disconnected March 14, 2023. An outstanding balance was placed on the PG&E bill; however, those charges have since been written off. As a result, the customer's account has a zero balance.

- *San Jose Water Company – High Bill/Meter Reading Issue* The consumer contends he received a high bill from San Jose Water for an enormous amount of usage, suggesting an erroneous meter reading, especially when subsequent bills showed a lower average usage.

The customer was in contact with San Jose Water Company multiple times over the period of a week. The water company sent out a technician to test the meter, and the meter tested correctly. Further investigation by San Jose Water Company revealed that the company inadvertently included the meter reading from the previous consumer at the same location, thus resulting in a higher bill. A correction was made, and a credit was issued in the amount of \$209.85.

## CAB RECEIVED 7,395 CONSUMER CONTACTS

CAB's team of representatives are responsible for assisting consumers with answering questions and resolving disputes with their utility providers. These contacts are received via phone, mail, email, or website complaint

forms. In Q4-2023, CAB received **7,395 contacts**<sup>3</sup> (see **Figure 1** below). **Table 2** below shows that Energy accounted for approximately **58 percent** of the total industry contacts during Q4. **31 percent** of the contacts were related to Telecommunications, and the remaining **12 percent** of the contacts were distributed among Water, Transportation, and Non-Regulated utilities.

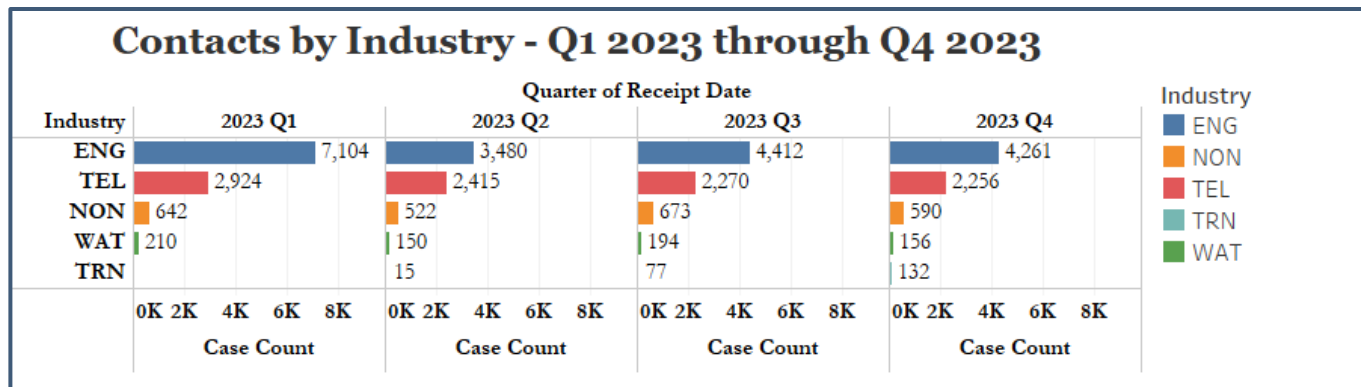


Figure 1: Consumer Contacts by Industry and Quarter

During Q4-2023, Billing issues accounted for **40 percent** of consumer contacts across all industries. The second and fourth most common category of issues were Not Regulated – No Jurisdiction, at **21 percent** and Service also at **15 percent** (see **Table 2** below).

Table 2: Consumer Contacts by Category and Industry – Q4 2023

Category	Energy	Non-Regulated Utility	Telecommunications	Transportation	Water	Total	% Total (All Contacts)
Billing	2348	15	481	2	98	2944	40%
Lifeline			909			909	12%
Not Regulated - No Jurisdiction	530	555	445	16	26	1572	21%
Policy and Practices	326	6	86	2	5	425	6%
Public Purpose Programs	183	6			2	191	3%
Rates	134	1			7	142	2%
Service	740	6	337		18	1101	15%
Transportation				111		111	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4261</b>	<b>589</b>	<b>2258</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>7395</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>% of Total All Industries</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>100%</b>	

CAB began receiving Transportation consumer contacts in June 2023. CAB will continue to report on the Transportation contacts it receives in future quarterly reports. CAB’s role is to accept all consumer contacts related to Transportation and perform triage to determine which contacts can be resolved by CAB and which contacts need to be referred to Transportation Enforcement.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this report “Total Contacts” is calculated as all contacts received during the time period excluding contacts to CAB where the category is “Unknown”, caller not online, wrong number, where the industry is unknown if the analysis is by industry, or the utility is unknown if the analysis is by utility company.

## CAB ASSISTED 2,998 CONSUMERS RESOLVE INFORMAL COMPLAINTS

CAB’s Informal Complaints (ICs) are written complaints<sup>4</sup> about issues under the CPUC’s jurisdiction, and CAB has the authority to act as an intermediary between the consumer and the regulated utility to resolve the consumer’s issues. The IC process allows consumers an easily accessible way to resolve disputes with their utility. During Q4-2023, CAB resolved 2998 ICs, see **Figure 2** below. Of the ICs closed in Q4, **72 percent** were for Energy ICs, **25 percent** were for Telecommunications ICs, and the remaining **3 percent** were attributed to Water ICs.

**Table 3: Informal Consumer Complaints Resolved by Industry and Quarter**

Industry	2023 Q1	2023 Q2	2023 Q3	2023 Q4	Total
Energy	1,343	2,169	1,364	2,167	8,149
Telecommunications	768	919	710	745	3,815
Transportation	-	-	3	9	12
Water	73	84	63	77	381
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,184</b>	<b>3,172</b>	<b>2,140</b>	<b>2,998</b>	<b>12,357</b>

When Informal Complaints are closed, they are assigned a case disposition. The disposition summarizes the results of the case. Cases are resolved *In Consumer Favor*, when it is determined that the utility made an error, or failed to comply with commission orders, tariffs, and decisions. Cases are resolved *In Favor of Utility* when, after a review of the facts of the case, CAB finds that the utility did not make an error and complied with commission orders, etc. The disposition, *Discretion Utility*, usually occurs when it is determined that while the utility was not out of compliance, the utility, for example, issues a courtesy bill adjustment. When the disposition, *Compromise*, is identified, the disposition indicates that both parties in the dispute had valid arguments, and both the utility and the consumer came to an amicable agreement.

**Table 3** below shows the distribution of the above-described dispositions for the Energy, Telecommunications, and Water utilities. The table shows during Q4, Energy ICs were decided in favor of the utility **58 percent** of the time while Telecommunications ICs were decided in favor of consumers **50 percent** of the time. Water utility related ICs were resolved in favor of the utilities **61 percent** of the time.

<sup>4</sup> Written complaints means that CAB received the consumer’s complaint from a written source such as letter, email, web, and faxed.



Table 3: Informal Consumer Complaints Resolved by Industry and Disposition

Industry	Disposition	2023 Q1		2023 Q2		2023 Q3		2023 Q4	
ENG	IN FAVOR OF UTILITY	801	60%	1352	63%	792	59%	1250	58%
	IN CONSUMER FAVOR	474	36%	729	34%	516	38%	842	39%
	DISCRETION UTILITY	43	3%	32	1%	30	2%	45	2%
	COMPROMISE	14	1%	42	2%	13	1%	15	1%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1332</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2155</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1351</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2152</b>	<b>100%</b>
TEL	IN FAVOR OF UTILITY	268	36%	295	33%	289	42%	304	42%
	IN CONSUMER FAVOR	441	59%	550	61%	360	52%	359	50%
	DISCRETION UTILITY	31	4%	36	4%	37	5%	43	6%
	COMPROMISE	8	1%	20	2%	4	1%	19	3%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>748</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>901</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>690</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>725</b>	<b>100%</b>
WAT	IN FAVOR OF UTILITY	38	53%	47	57%	36	57%	46	61%
	IN CONSUMER FAVOR	33	46%	32	39%	24	38%	28	37%
	DISCRETION UTILITY	0	0%	1	1%	3	5%	2	3%
	COMPROMISE	1	1%	3	4%	0	0%	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100%</b>

## ENERGY UTILITIES RECAP WITH Q4-2023 HIGHLIGHTS

This report reviews consumer contacts CAB received in Q4-2023 for all energy utilities and more specifically, the Top-10 utilities. In this case, being a member of the Top-10 means that CAB received the most contacts for these companies compared to all other energy companies regulated by the CPUC.

### ENERGY CONSUMER CONTACTS Q4-2023

CAB received a total of **4,261** contacts related to energy utility companies in Q4-2023. The Top-10 energy utilities accounted for **96 percent** of total energy contacts. Most of the contacts were from Southern California Edison (SCE) customers and Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) customers, accounting for **48 percent** and **32 percent** of contacts respectively. Most of the contacts were related to High Bills, NJ Customer Service, Payment Arrangements, Disconnection Non-payment and Delayed Orders/Missed Appointments.

Table 4 shows the breakout of Top-10 Energy Utilities by count and percentage of the total.

Table 4: Top-10 Energy Utility Contact Statistics

Contacts and Top 10 Utilities		Q4 2023	
Total Energy Contacts		4261	100%
Total Top-10 Utility Energy Contacts			
Top-10 Utility Name			
	Southern California Edison Company	2046	48%
	Pacific Gas & Electric Company	1373	32%
	San Diego Gas & Electric Company	210	5%
	Southern California Gas Company	204	5%
	SFE Energy Inc.	65	2%
	AAA Natural Gas	52	1%
	United Energy Trading LLC dba Collective Energy	45	1%
	Spark Energy Gas LLC	35	1%
	StateWise Energy California LLC	23	1%
	Southwest Gas Corporation	22	1%

Figure 3 below shows the relative impact that each of the Top-10 energy utilities had on CAB’s energy workload by volume of contacts. The chart was created by using the variables - utility name, case type, and case count. Each of the Top-10 utilities is represented by a unique color, which is replicated throughout this report, and the size of the bubbles is relative to the case counts for each utility and case type.

In Q4-2023, CAB’s energy consumer contacts were dominated by SCE, PG&E, and San Diego Gas & Electric consumers respectively. Most of CAB’s staff resources were allocated to these three companies. The various case types represent different contact resolution processes, with Phone Contacts being the least time intensive, and ICs and Complaints<sup>5</sup> being the most intensive.

<sup>5</sup> A consumer contact expressing dissatisfaction with or protesting an action or practice of the CPUC, or a regulated or non-regulated utility. The dispute may not be within the purview of the Consumer Affairs Branch to investigate, and the issue is best handled by another CPUC branch. The allegation is NOT sent to the utility for investigation and response, but handled as a referral to the appropriate utility, CPUC division, or closed outright with the appropriate letter of explanation.

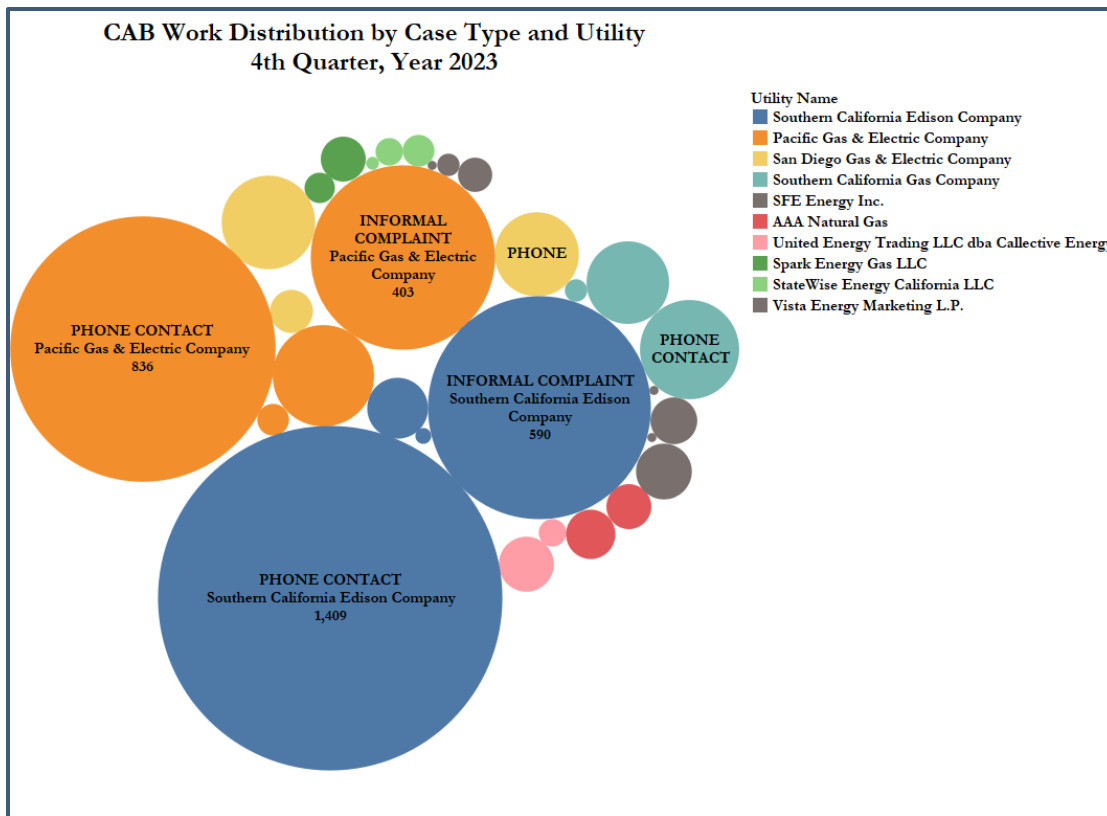


Figure 3: CAB Work Distribution by Case Type and Utility – Q4-2023

**Table 5** below shows the ranking of the Top-10 Energy Utilities for Q4-2023, by the number of informal complaints submitted and the average utility response interval. When CAB sends an IC to a utility, the expectation is that the utility will respond to CAB within **20 business days** to resolve the IC. SCE had the largest average utility response interval, well over the **20-day** standard. SCE’s long utility response interval of **48 calendar days** may be due to the complex nature of billing complaints. SCE also continues to work on reducing complaint backlogs stemming from problems associated with transitioning to a new billing platform back in 2021. In contrast, PG&E, a similarly sized company, responded to **455 ICs** with an average response interval of only **15 calendar days**.

**Table 5: Top-10 Energy Utilities by Case Responses - Average Utility Response Intervals Q4-2023**

Utility	Count of Utility Responses	Q4 2023 Average Response Interval
<b>Southern California Edison Company</b>	1241	<b>48</b>
Pacific Gas & Electric Company	455	15
San Diego Gas & Electric Company	80	17
Southern California Gas Company	72	20
SFE Energy Inc.	31	27
AAA Natural Gas	20	2
Spark Energy Gas LLC	12	24
Liberty Utilities (CalPeco Electric) LLC	9	27
<b>Southwest Gas Corporation</b>	6	<b>89</b>
Vista Energy Marketing L.P.	6	12
United Energy Trading LLC dba Collective Energy	6	4

**TOP-10 SUBCATEGORIES FOR TOP-10 ENERGY COMPANIES FOR Q2-2023**

Typically, when CAB reports case data by subcategory, we count cases and group them by “primary subcategory”. The primary subcategory is the first subcategory attributed to the complaint, and it represents the overarching reason the consumer contacted CAB. However, the CIMS database allows multiple subcategories to a case (attributes), which allows for a better description of the case and subsequent in-depth analysis.

In **Figure 4**, subcategory frequency represents the count of the number of times an individual subcategory was selected in Q4-2023. High Bill was applied to **22 percent** of all contacts, followed by NJ Customer Service<sup>6</sup> and Payment Arrangements being applied to **20 percent** and **8 percent** respectively.

<sup>6</sup> NJ Customer Service subcategory applies to customer service-related issues such as being transferred from one person to another multiple times within one phone call, not being able to reach the correct department or someone who could deal with the issue, and rude utility representatives.

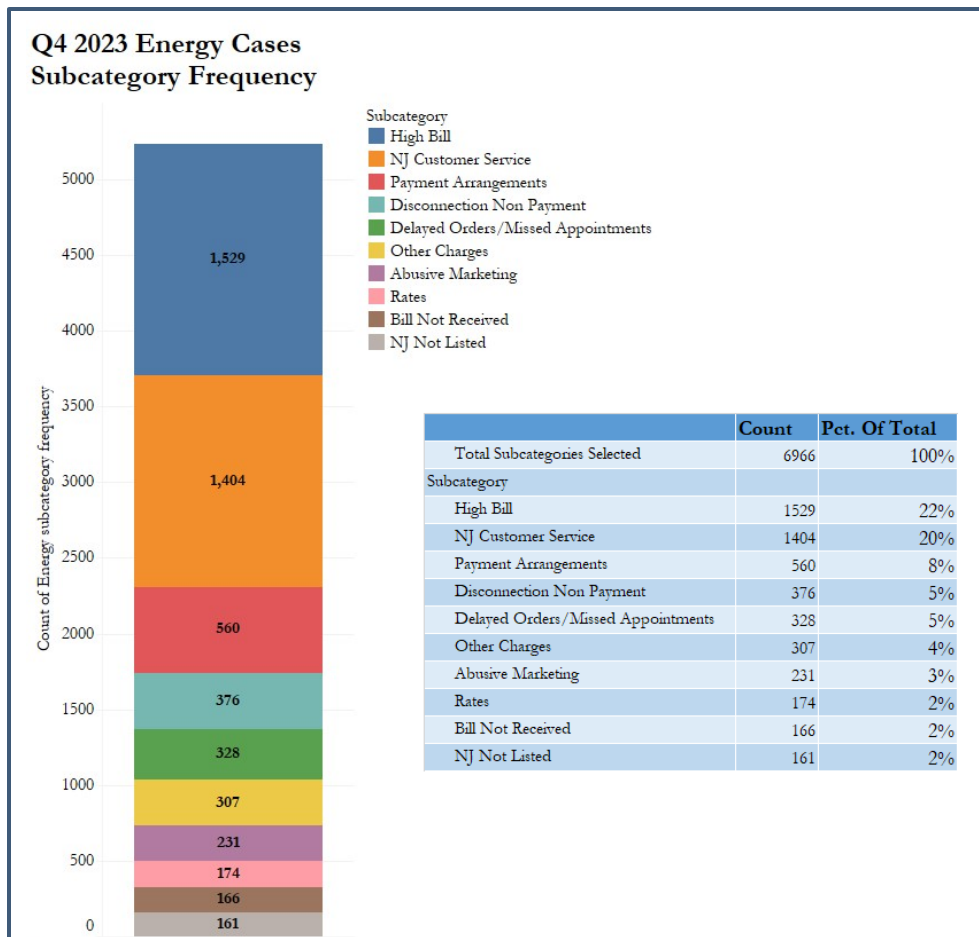


Figure 4: Top-10 Subcategory Frequencies for Top 10 Energy Utilities Consumer Contacts

Figure 5 and Table 6 below show the subcategory frequency distribution for the Top-10 energy utilities in the fourth quarter of 2023. A review of subcategory frequencies data reveals that SCE accounted for the largest number of subcategory choices for 5 out of the Top-10 subcategories including, High Bill, NJ Customer Service, Delayed Orders/Missed Appointments, Other Charges, and Bill Not Received. SCE continues to struggle with delayed billing issues as they account for **78 percent** of the Bill Not Received Subcategory choice.

PG&E dominated the Disconnection Non-Payment, Payment Arrangements, and Rates subcategories.

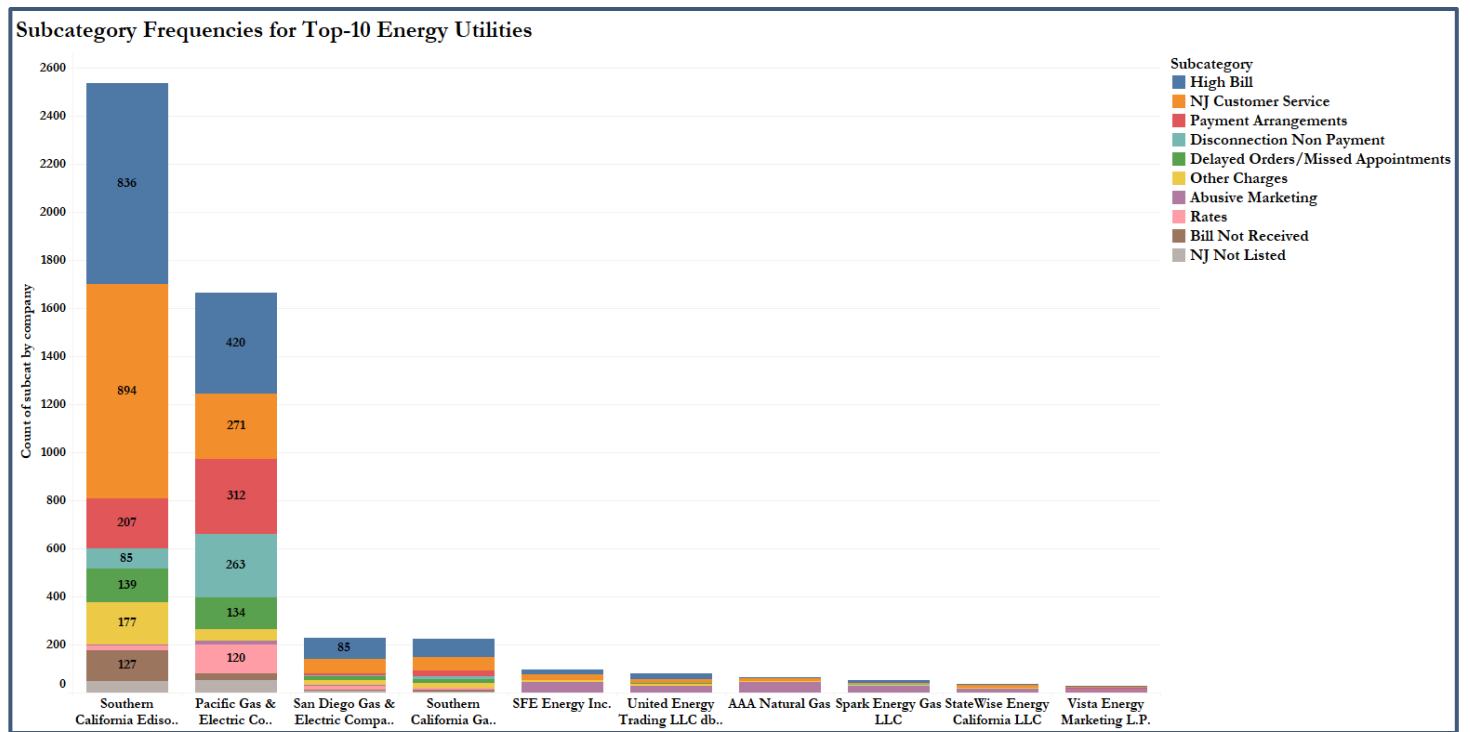


Figure 5: Subcategory Frequency for Top-10 Energy Utilities

Table 6: Top-10 Subcategory Frequencies for Top-10 Energy Utilities Consumer Contacts

Utility Name	Abusive Marketing	Bill Not Received	Delayed Orders/Missed Appointments	Disconnection Non-Payment	High Bill	NJ Customer Service	NJ Not Listed	Other Charges	Payment Arrangements	Rates
Southern California Edison Company	3	127	139	85	836	894	49	177	207	21
Pacific Gas & Electric Company	16	26	134	263	420	271	54	47	312	120
San Diego Gas & Electric Company	1	3	15	4	85	62	8	20	9	20
Southern California Gas Company	0	7	18	10	75	55	6	19	27	7
SFE Energy Inc.	43	-	-	-	20	24	1	9	-	-
United Energy Trading LLC dba Collective Energy	30	-	4	-	21	16	-	8	-	-
AAA Natural Gas	44	-	-	-	5	13	-	3	-	-
Spark Energy Gas LLC	28	-	2	1	11	5	2	4	-	-
StateWise Energy California LLC	17	-	-	-	6	11	1	3	-	-
Vista Energy Marketing L.P.	17	-	2	-	4	3	-	2	1	-

## TELECOMMUNICATIONS UTILITIES 12-MONTH RECAP WITH Q4-2023 HIGHLIGHTS

In Q4-2023, CAB handled a total of **1,551** contacts pertaining to telecommunication utilities, excluding LifeLine-related inquiries. Notably, the following 10 telecommunication utilities received the majority, encompassing **86 percent** of all telecommunication-related contacts for the quarter. AT&T California received the highest volume of contracts, constituting **29 percent** of the total queries directed at telecommunication companies. For a detailed breakdown of the total number and percentage of contacts received by the top 10 telecommunication utilities in Q4-2023, please refer to **Table 7** below.

**Table 7: Top-10 Telecommunication Utility Contact Statistics.**

<b>Top -10 Telecommunications Contacts</b>	<b>Q4 2023</b>	
Total for Telecommunications Contacts	1551	100%
<b>Top-10 Utilities</b>		
AT&T California	443	29%
Frontier California Inc.	179	12%
Comcast Phone of California	170	11%
T-Mobile West LLC	139	9%
Charter Fiberlink CA-CCO, LLC	121	8%
Cellco Partnership	116	7%
AT&T Mobility Wireless Operations Holdings Inc.	74	5%
Comcast OTR1, LLC	40	3%
TracFone Wireless, Inc	<b>28</b>	2%
Cox California Telecom, LLC	18	1%
<b>Total Top-10 Telecommunications Contacts</b>	<b>1328</b>	<b>86%</b>

When examining the fourth-quarter data, a clear shift is evident compared to the preceding quarter. The initial surge in consumer contacts noted in January declined through the second quarter, reaching its lowest point in the third quarter, particularly in July. In the fourth quarter, contacts remained low compared to the earlier quarters. However, during the fourth quarter, consumer contacts for the service and billing categories plummeted to an all-time low. The billing category is selected when consumer contacts are related to disputed items on a utility bill, the bill's appearance, or other utility charges. On the other hand, the service category is selected when consumer contacts pertain to the services provided by the utility. This shift signifies a significant adjustment in the volume of inquiries and issues raised by consumers, primarily due to it being the end of the year. **Figure 6** illustrates that the service category specifically involves consumers contacting the CPUC regarding the services provided to them by the utility.

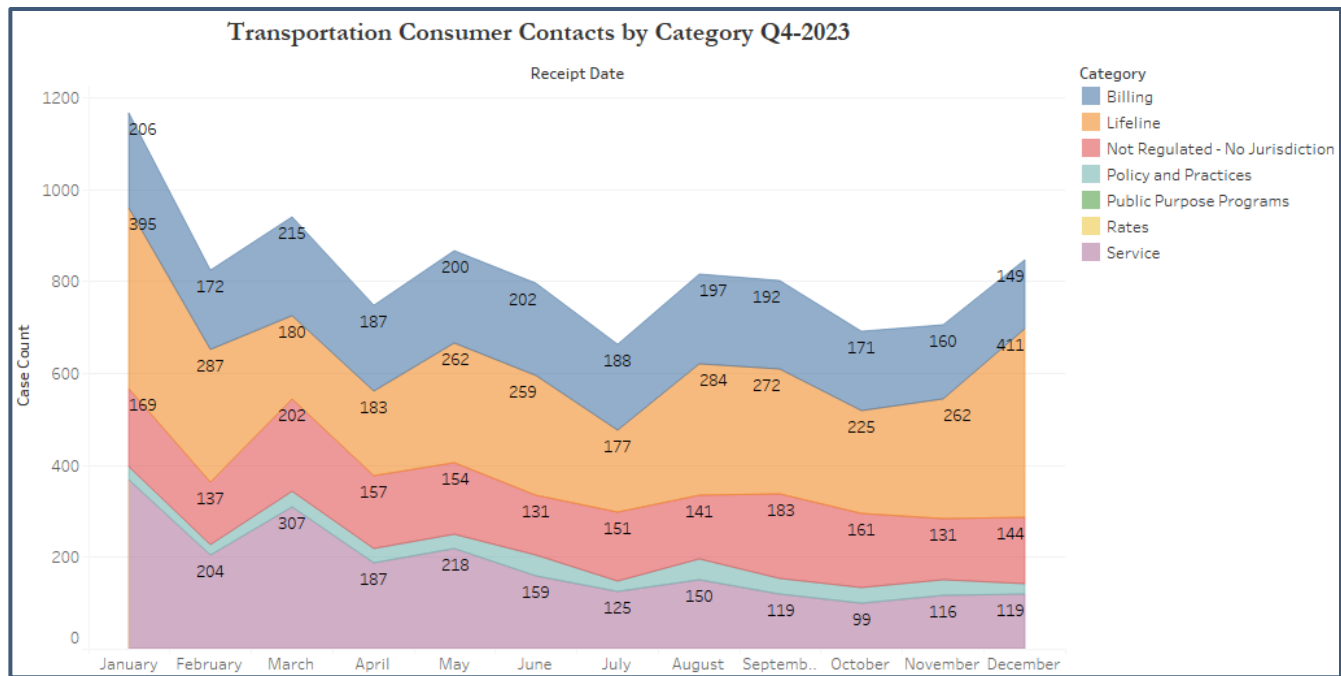


Figure 6: Top-10 Telecommunication Company Consumer Contacts by Category

In Q4, there is a general decrease in the number of contacts across various categories, with Billing and Service experiencing the most noticeable declines. Notably, the LifeLine category witnessed a significant increase, especially in December. This surge is particularly intriguing considering the earlier decrease in LifeLine cases at the beginning of Q3. Also noteworthy in the LifeLine category is the rise in customer contacts at the end of Q4. The LifeLine Category is chosen when consumers contact CAB regarding disputes related to the Lifeline Program, handling either Lifeline Appeals or Lifeline Billing disputes. Cases labeled as "Not Regulated - No Jurisdiction" followed a pattern similar to previous quarters. The Policy & Practices category also remained relatively stable, maintaining consistency with the preceding quarters. This category is selected when consumers contact CAB about the CPUC or utility’s policies and operations. Furthermore, cases related to Public Purpose Programs appeared sporadically, indicating their persistent presence but infrequent occurrence. This category is chosen when consumers contact CAB about low-income assistance programs, such as the Universal LifeLine Telephone Service program and programs aiding the deaf and disabled.



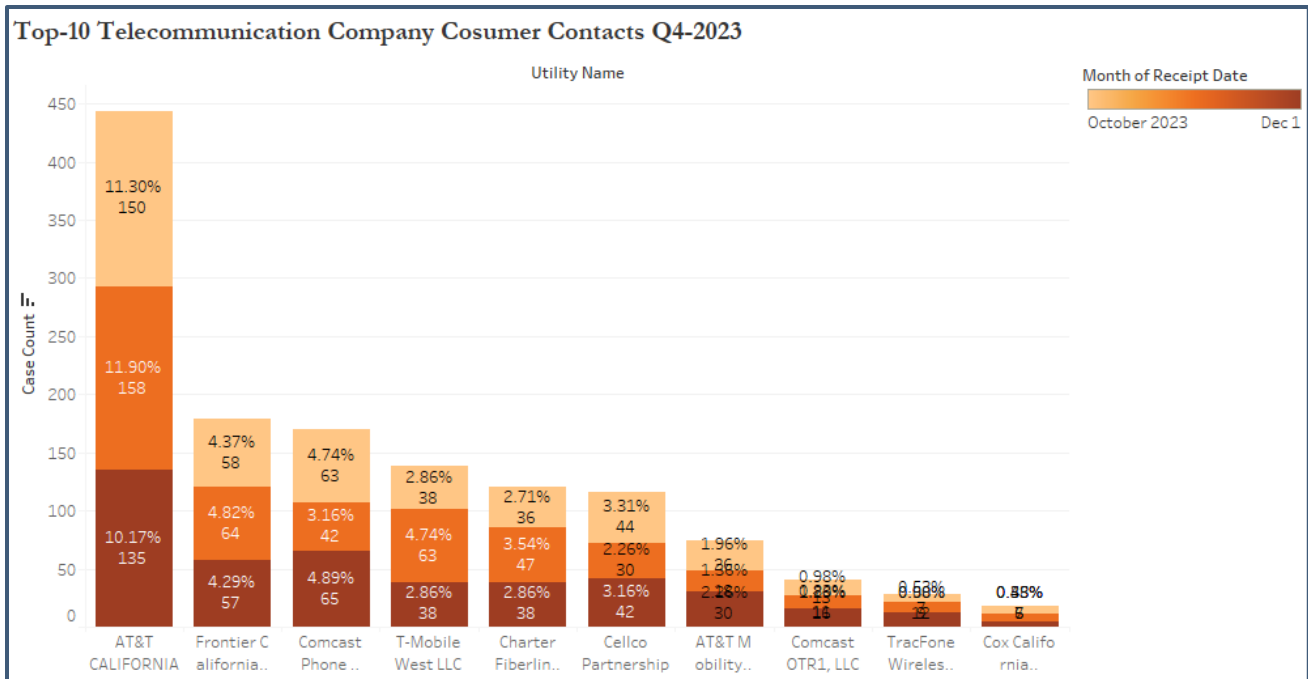


Figure 7: Telecommunication Company Consumer Contacts

Figure 7 above presents a comprehensive overview of case counts for the top 10 telecommunication companies during October, November, and December. AT&T California consistently takes the lead, having the largest share of contacts each month. Following closely is Frontier California Inc., securing its position as the second-largest contributor. Interestingly, Frontier had more contacts every month in Q3 compared to every month in Q4.

Noteworthy changes in the number of contacts received by CAB are observed for Comcast Phone of California, T-Mobile West LLC, and Verizon Wireless, particularly in comparison to Q3 2023. In Q3, T-Mobile West LLC recorded 43 contacts in July, 55 in August, and 36 in September. Moving into Q4, 38 contacts in October, 63 in November, and 38 in December. A distinct spike in contacts during November is evident, echoing a similar pattern observed in the previous quarter where the middle of the quarter witnessed the highest number of contacts.

Comcast Phone of California witnessed a significant increase in customer contacts during the fourth quarter. In July, there were 40 contacts, followed by 54 in August and 59 in September. In Q4, the trend continued with 63 contacts in October, 42 in November, and 65 in December.

On the other hand, Verizon Wireless experienced an increase in contacts by September, however, they did not make it to the top 10 companies in Q4.

This data suggests that certain utility companies may undergo seasonal variations or face shifts in customer service demands, potentially influenced by factors such as network issues, customer complaints, or service disruptions.

Figure 8 illustrates the subcategory frequencies for the Top-10 telecommunication utilities in the fourth quarter of 2023. Analyzing this data reveals several important patterns and trends. First and foremost, subcategories like NJ Equipment, NJ Internet Billing, High Bill, NJ Customer Service, and Other Charges are

consistently prevalent across multiple utility companies. This suggests that common issues are being encountered within the telecommunication sector.

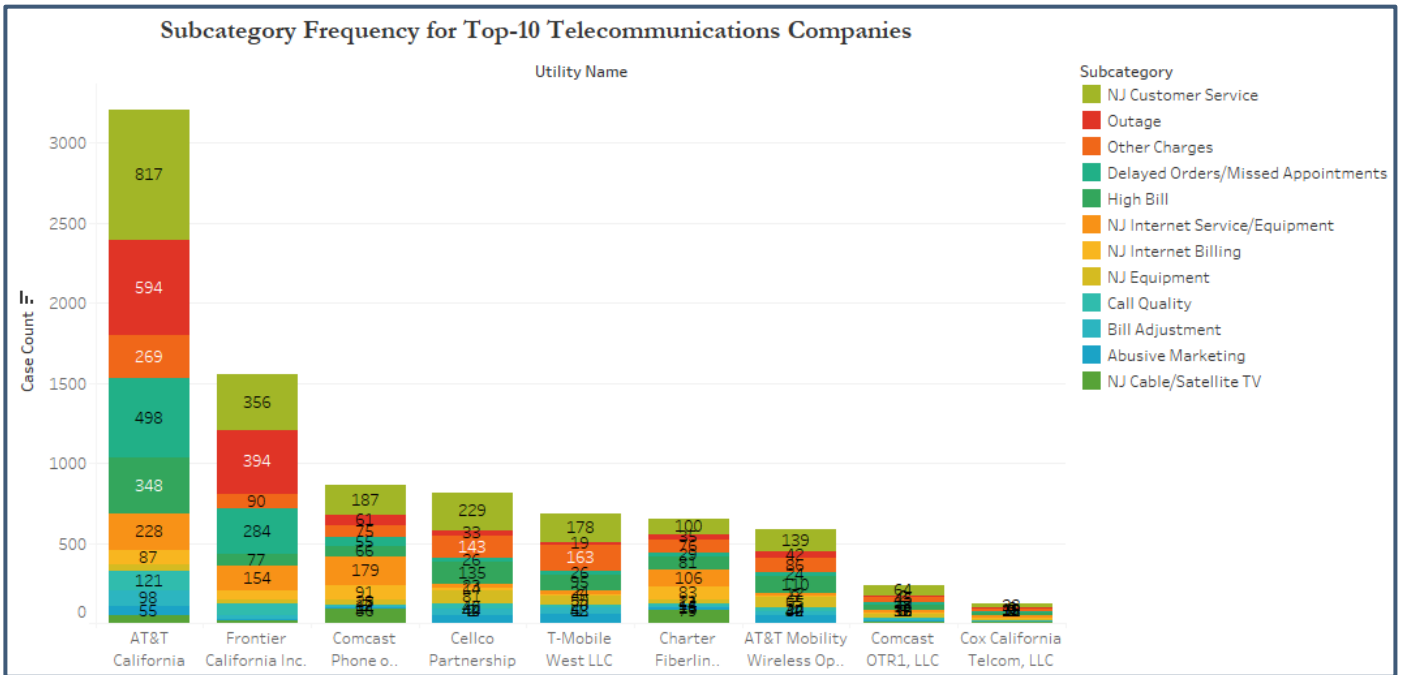


Figure 8: Subcategory Frequency for Top-10 Telecommunication Utilities for Q4-2023

The Outage subcategory is also significant, indicating instances of service disruptions. It is evident that some utilities are grappling with higher case counts in this area, signaling a need for improved service reliability. Notably, AT&T California stands out with a higher frequency across various subcategories, particularly in NJ Equipment, High Bill, and NJ Customer Service. Conversely, Frontier California Inc. exhibits substantial case counts in NJ Customer Service, Delayed Orders/Missed Appointments, and Outages. This data hints at specific areas where each utility could focus on improvement. This may involve addressing customer service concerns or enhancing service reliability to reduce cases related to outages.

## LIFELINE

CAB has three dedicated California LifeLine specialists to assist consumers in answering inquiries and questions related to the LifeLine program. CAB also reviews appeals filed by consumers who were disqualified by the program’s Fourth-Party Administrator (TPA). Additionally, CAB facilitates LifeLine billing issues to service providers for investigation and resolution as necessary.

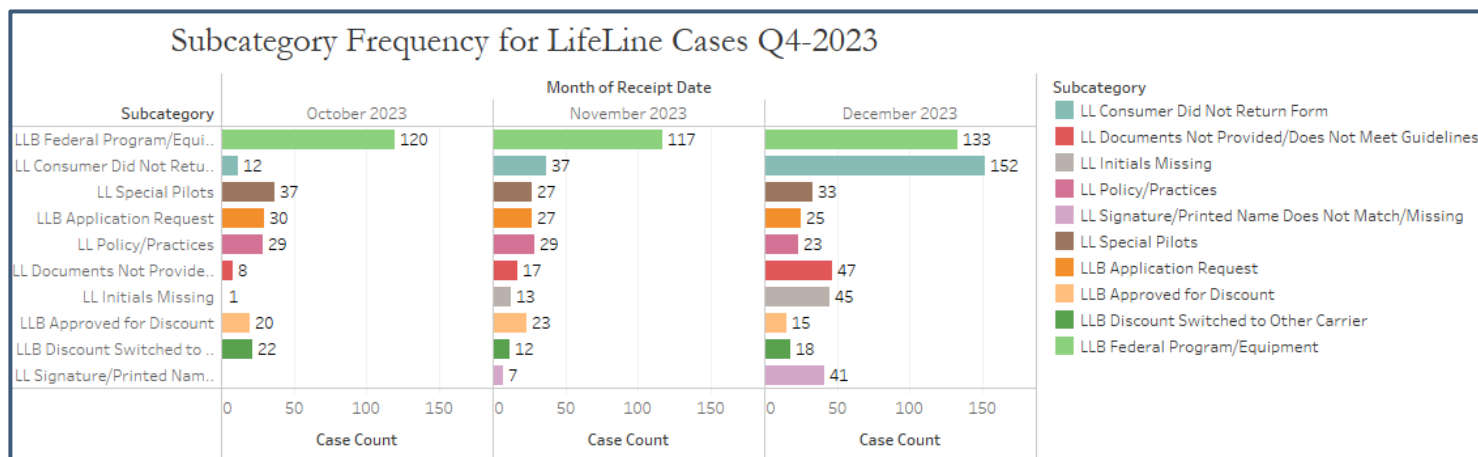
**Table 8** details the number of LifeLine cases received and the top written case types closed in the fourth quarter. Lifeline Billing cases had a total of 136 cases successfully closed in Q4-2023. When it comes to LifeLine Wireless Appeal cases, there was a slight decrease in closure rates compared to the previous quarter, going from 174 in Q3 to 144 cases closed in Q4. Furthermore, the data underscores the persistent nature of LifeLine Phone Contacts, where consumers reach out to CAB with their concerns, queries, and complaints related to LifeLine. During Q3, 325 LifeLine Phone Contact cases were successfully resolved, and this number increased to 368 in Q4. This analysis of LifeLine contacts closed in Q4-2023 emphasizes the vital role

of CAB’s effective consumer support and resolution mechanisms in addressing an array of consumer needs and concerns.

**Table 8: LifeLine Contacts Received and Closed**

	2023				% Change Q3 to Q4
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	
<b>LifeLine Contacts Received</b>					
Phone Contacts Received	213	309	325	368	13%
Written Contacts Received	629	388	421	546	30%
Total Contacts Received	842	697	746	914	23%
<b>Top LifeLine Cases Type Closed</b>					
LifeLine Wireless Appeal	619	225	174	144	-17%
LifeLine Billing	322	161	172	136	-21%

The Top-10 LifeLine subcategories’ frequency in Q4-2023 are shown in **Figure 9**.



**Figure 9: LifeLine Subcategory Frequency Comparison between October, November and December 2023**

Cases associated with the LifeLine Billing (LLB) Federal Program/Equipment in the fourth quarter displayed a level of consistency compared to the end of the third quarter. This subcategory is chosen when consumers encounter issues securing a free or discounted phone through their Federal LifeLine Wireless Carrier. These issues typically involve not receiving the equipment or receiving a defective handset.

On the other hand, instances of LLB Approved for Discount services saw a significant decrease in the fourth quarter when compared to the third quarter. This subcategory is selected when consumers assert that they are not receiving the LifeLine discount on their bill despite being confirmed by the LifeLine Administrator to receive it from the carrier linked to their current telephone bill.

Occurrences of LL Documents Not Provided/Does Not Meet Guidelines experienced a decline from the spike near the end of Q3 in Q4, followed by an increase again towards the end of Q4. This suggests that CAB began receiving complaints about consumers either not receiving the correct documents or being rejected due to not meeting the annual income guidelines required for enrollment in the LifeLine program.

Concerning LLB Application Request, where consumers attempt to request a new LL application from their carrier but have not received the form, and CAB has verified that they are not pending in the Certifying Agents database as a new customer or as a customer attempting to get back onto the program, the number of

cases remained consistent. Meanwhile, LL Consumer Did Not Return Form (cases where application and other forms are either not received or received after the due date) showed relatively low numbers in the third quarter, peaking in August but then decreasing. This trend continued into the fourth quarter until December, when a substantial increase in cases occurred, making it the highest subcategory selected in December.

LL Policy/Practices contacts, where a LifeLine consumer expresses dissatisfaction with or protests a LifeLine-related action or practice of a utility regulated by the CPUC, remained relatively stable. LL Form Complexity (consumer finding the application form complex) also played a role in consumer contacts.

This Q4 data underscores the evolving consumer needs within the LifeLine program.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL JUSTICE (ESJ) CONSUMER CONTACTS FOR Q4-2023

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### ESJ OVERVIEW

The mission of the CPUC is to regulate essential utility services to protect consumers and safeguard the environment, assuring safe and reliable access to all Californians. CAB is committed to furthering the CPUC's commitment to advance Environmental Social Justice (ESJ) principles by integrating ESJ considerations into our work.

The CPUC identifies ESJ communities as:

- Predominantly communities of color or low-income
- Underrepresented in the policy setting or decision-making process
- Subject to a disproportionate impact from one or more environmental hazards; and
- Likely to experience disparate implementation of environmental regulations and socio-economic investments in their communities.

ESJ communities may also include:

- Disadvantaged Communities
- All Tribal Lands
- Low-income households (defined as household incomes below 80 percent of the area median income); and
- Low-income census tracts (defined as census tracts where aggregated household incomes are less than 80 percent of area or state median income)
- For the purposes of this report, CAB identifies ESJ communities using census tracts that score in the top 25 percent of CalEnviroScreen 4.0 and rolled them up to United States Postal Service (USPS) zip codes.

CalEnviroScreen is a mapping tool and data that helps identify California communities that are most affected by many sources of pollution, and where people are often especially vulnerable to pollution's effects. The tool uses environmental, health, and socioeconomic information to produce scores for every census tract in the state. The scores are mapped so that the different communities can be compared. An area with a high CalEnviroScreen score is one that experiences a much higher pollution burden than areas with comparatively low scores. CalEnviroScreen ranks communities based on data that are available from state and federal government sources. CalEnviroScreen 4.0 is the latest version and was last updated in October 2021.

CPUC defines Disadvantaged Communities pursuant to CalEnviroScreen 4.0 as census tracts that score in the top 25 percentile (75<sup>th</sup>- 100<sup>th</sup> percentiles)<sup>7</sup> of CalEnviroScreen 4.0, those that score within the highest 5 percent of CalEnviroScreen 4.0’s Pollution Burden but do not receive an overall CalEnviroScreen score, census tracts identified as Disadvantaged Communities in CalEnviroScreen 3.0, and areas under the control of federally recognized Tribes.

While the focus of CAB’s analysis is on the contacts it receives from consumers in the top 25 percentile, CAB’s analysis uses consumer contact data from the other three Quartiles (0-24, 25-49, 50-74 percentiles) in some portions of the ESJ analysis.

### ENERGY ESJ HIGHLIGHTS

The table below shows the upward trend of energy related contacts from consumers who live in zip codes where their ESJ Percentile is calculated between 75 and 100. Complaints exhibit an upward trend over the previous two quarters. The spike in the number of contacts during the first quarter of 2023 is attributed to consumers’ reaction to rate increases that occurred during the first 3 months of 2023.

**Table 11: Energy ESJ Contacts 75th - 100th Percentile, Q4-2022 to Q4-2023.**

ESJ Contacts Percentile	Q1 2023	Q2 2023	Q3 2023	Q4 2023
Energy ESJ 75 - 100	1,411	761	936	1047

**Figure 14** below shows the distribution of the count of consumer contacts by zip codes that are included in the 75<sup>th</sup> to 100<sup>th</sup> ESJ Percentiles for Q4-2023. As with telecommunications ESJ customers<sup>8</sup>, the most heavily impacted customers reside in the Central and San Joaquin Valleys.

<sup>7</sup> The higher the percentile number, the greater the impact of the measure on the affected geographic area.

<sup>8</sup> See the [Q3 2023 CAB Quarterly report](#) for an in-depth analysis of Telecommunications ESJ analysis.

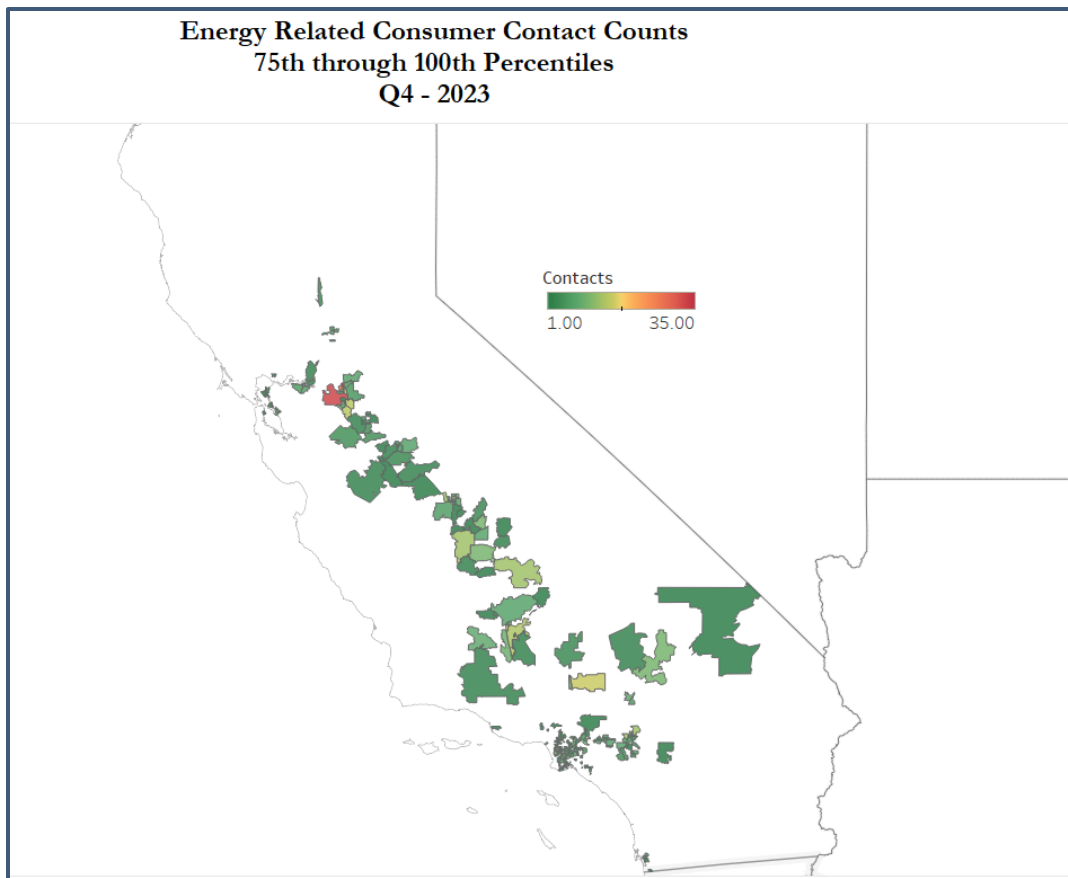


Figure 14: Q4 Energy Contacts in the 75<sup>th</sup> to 100<sup>th</sup> ESJ Percentiles

To determine which zip codes are experiencing greater impacts relative to others the data is normalized by mathematically adjusting the values measured by creating a ratio. Using the normalization ratios allows for an “apples to apples” comparison between zip codes. The higher the ratio, the greater the impact or intensity. For this analysis, we divided the total number of consumer contacts for Disconnection Non-Payment by the population in the zip code. This ratio allows for a simple way to compare consumer contacts across zip codes of differing population sizes and contact counts for each zip code.

Multiple zip codes in the city of Stockton are experiencing negative impacts as consumers in the affected zip codes are struggling with disconnection notices and turned to CAB for assistance. Figure 15 below shows a close up of the Stockton area that appears in Figure 14 above. The Top 10 zip codes with the highest normalization ratios appear in the table next to the map. Of the top 10 zip codes, seven out of ten are in Stockton.

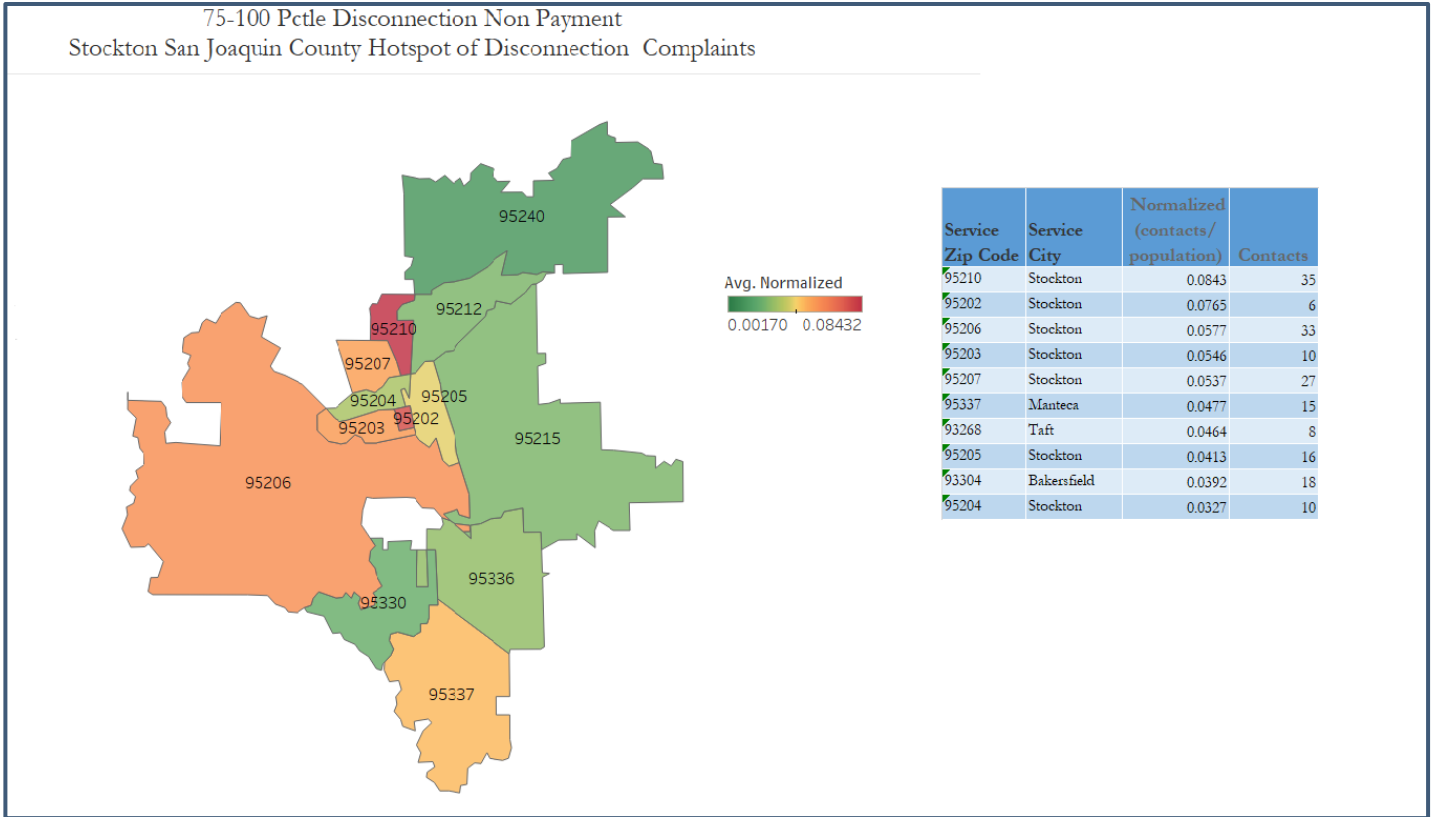


Figure 15: City of Stockton Hotspot of Disconnection Contacts

Stockton is a city besieged by a series of complex socio-economic and environmental issues. The table below provides a snapshot of demographics related to the zip codes which may help explain why this cluster of zip codes has so many Disconnection Non-Payment contacts.

According to a 2019 article in the Los Angeles Times, in nationwide studies of extreme poverty, Stockton frequently vies with two other San Joaquin Valley cities— Fresno and Bakersfield, where river-irrigated farmlands make growers rich but leave tens of thousands of residents in poverty — for the dubious honor of being listed among the most destitute. More people live in degraded environmental conditions in Stockton than in any other part of California, and the city’s polluted waterways tend to run alongside its neighborhoods of deepest poverty, highest incidents of asthma, and most frequent violent crime.<sup>9</sup>

Stockton has gained notoriety as one of the most dangerous cities in the United States, given its violent crime rate of 1157 crimes per 100,000 people<sup>10</sup>. Stockton has a poverty rate of 16.8, while the national average is 15.1. In the past, there has been a direct correlation between high or low poverty rates and high or low crime stats. Elevated poverty levels and income disparities can contribute to heightened criminal activity, as individuals may resort to unlawful means to address their fundamental necessities.<sup>11</sup>

The table below shows us what these zip codes have in common that can help precipitate a situation such as this. With zip code 95204 being somewhat of an exception, the other surrounding zip codes have much in

<sup>9</sup> [Trump delta water policy threatens Stockton as well as salmon - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](https://www.latimes.com)

<sup>10</sup> This data reflects the 2022 calendar year and was released from the [FBI](https://www.fbi.com) in September, 2023; this is the most current data available. [CDE \(cjs.gov\)](https://www.cde.ca.gov)

<sup>11</sup> [Stockton, CA Crime Rates: Stats & Map \(areavibes.com\)](https://www.areavibes.com)



common. They have low median household incomes. In 2020, the median household income in California was \$78,672. The table is based on 2020 data, and each of the zip codes falls far below the state’s median income. The zip codes share high unemployment<sup>12</sup>, high poverty<sup>13</sup>, low education<sup>14</sup>, and a housing burden<sup>15</sup> not yet affected by the pandemic, English is not spoken in many households<sup>16</sup>, and the ethnic distribution is predominantly Hispanic.

Table 12: Demographic Information by Zip Code for Stockton Zip Codes with High Normalization Ratios<sup>17</sup>

ZIP	ESJ Pctl.	Median HH Income	Avg. Poverty Pctl	Unempl-oyment Pctl	Avg. Housing Burden Pctl	Avg. Linguistic Isolation Pctl	Avg. Education Pctl	African American %	Asian American %	Hispanic %	Native American %	White %	Other/ Multiple %
95202	99	14,404	96	95	96	78	89	17	17	50	1	19	2
95203	98	39,301	83	76	58	62	75	10	10	60	0	16	4
95204	75	44,809	61	42	47	39	55	7	9	43	0	36	5
95205	96	33,043	93	82	73	84	91	7	8	72	0	12	1
95206	96	43,559	85	86	75	75	87	12	15	61	0	9	3
95207	78	39,301	74	72	69	49	58	12	16	40	0	28	4
95210	76	40,182	85	86	76	66	76	13	33	36	0	14	4

The chart below shows consumer contacts regarding disconnection of services for non-payment. The period in the chart reflects consumer contacts for over a year before the COVID pandemic, during the pandemic, and the period after the disconnection restrictions were lifted for energy utilities. The blue line in the chart represents the total of all energy consumer contacts where the case contains the subcategory “Disconnection Non-Payment”. The orange, grey, green and gold lines represent contacts divided into the ESJ Percentile Quartiles of 0-24, 25-49, 50-74, and 75-100.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Unemployment Pctl, Unemployment percentile as defined below

Unemployment is defined as the percent of the population over the age of 16 that is unemployed and eligible for the labor force  
Source: CalEnviroScreen data dictionary

<sup>13</sup> The Poverty Percentile is the percentile of Poverty which is defined below.

Percent of population living below two times the federal poverty level

Source: CalEnviroScreen Data Dictionary

<sup>14</sup> The Education Percentile is defined as the percentile of Education as shown below.

Percent of population over 25 with less than a high school education

Source: CalEnviroScreen Data Dictionary

<sup>15</sup> Households are considered cost burdened when they spend more than 30% of their income on rent, mortgage and other housing needs. Housing Costs a Big Burden on Renters in Largest U.S. Counties (census.gov)

Housing Percentile burden is the percentile of where the zip code’s percentage of households meeting the census definition

<sup>16</sup> The indicator of Linguistic Isolation is the percent of limited speaking households, which are households where no one over age 14 speaks English well. [Linguistic Isolation | OEHHA \(ca.gov\)](#)

The Linguistic Isolation Percentile is calculated from the percents of Linguistic Isolation in each census tract.

Source: CalEnviroScreen Data Dictionary

<sup>17</sup> The data for this table comes from the CalEnviroScreen data available at [CalEnviroScreen 4.0 | OEHHA](#)

The demographic data included in the CalEnviroScreen data comes from 2020 Census data.

<sup>18</sup> A valid California zip code is required to assign a consumer contact to an ESJ Percentile associated with the zip code. Not all consumer contacts entered into the CIMS database contain a valid zip code. Contacts without a valid zip code are included in the data represented by the blue line. The contacts with valid zip codes are assigned to and reported by their respective ESJ quartile.



Consumer contacts for all the quartiles show increases in Disconnection Non-Payment contacts. All quartiles have significantly more contacts post rather than pre-pandemic. It should come as no surprise that the most vulnerable quartile (75<sup>th</sup> to 100<sup>th</sup>) shows the greatest rate of increase in disconnection contacts.

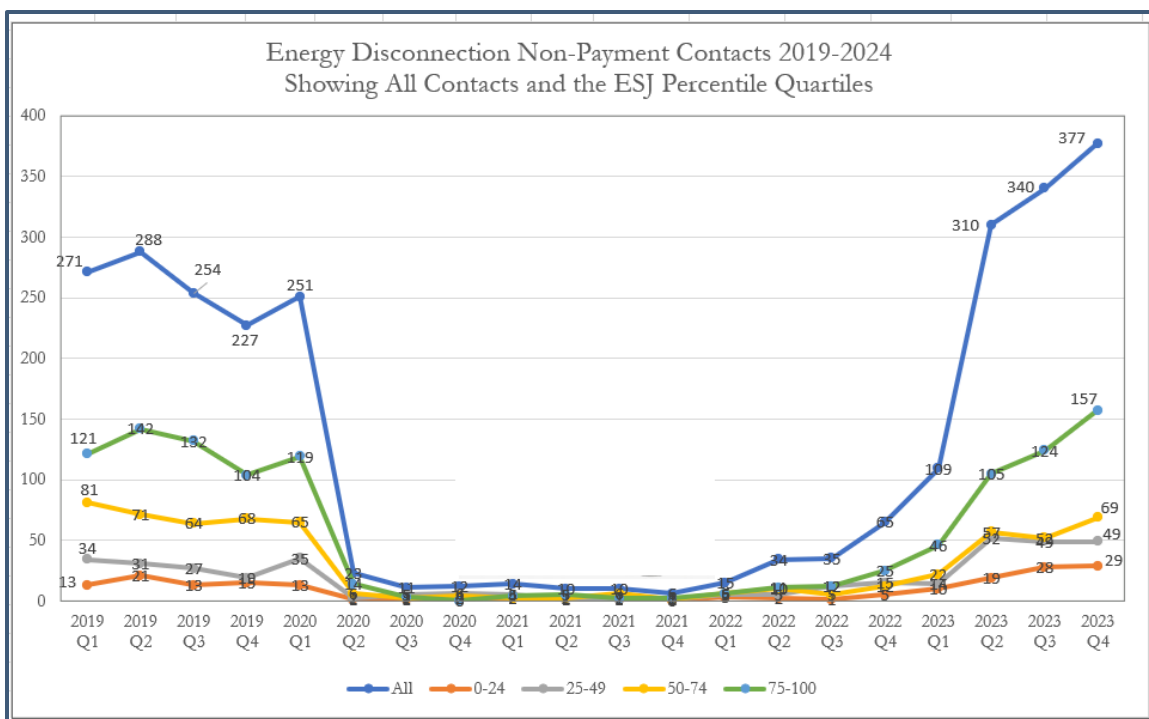


Figure 15: Disconnection Non-Payment Contacts in ESJ 75-100 Percentile, Q4-2022 to Q4-2023

The rate of growth is shown more profoundly in **Table 13** below. Consumers in the 75<sup>th</sup> to 100<sup>th</sup> percentiles show substantial growth rates near or over **100 percent** for two of the three quarters where change is measured. The table also shows the other three quartiles on the ESJ spectrum. The lower ESJ percentiles correspond to zip codes where consumers have increased amount of income and decreased environmental hazard and exposure. This table shows that all quartiles are demonstrating significant increases in contacts with CAB to get assistance for energy bills that are increasingly difficult to pay.

Table 13: Energy Disconnection Non-Payment Contacts in ESJ 75-100 Percentile, Q4-2022 to Q4-2023

ESJ Percentile	2022 Q4	2023 Q1	2023 Q2	2023 Q3	2023 Q4	Grand Total	Quartile Percent of Total
75-100	25	49	105	124	157	435	45%
50-74	17	26	84	85	69	264	27%
25-49	12	15	57	52	49	173	18%
0-24	5	13	19	28	29	89	9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>265</b>	<b>289</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>961</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Rate of Change</b>		75%	157%	9%	5%	-	

## TEAM AND CHANGES

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In addition to the consumer 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.

TEAM and CHANGES support LEP utility consumers statewide through **24** Community-based Organizations (CBOs) that offer services in their preferred language, and with cultural sensitivity. The CBOs provide consumer outreach, education, and case assistance (needs assistance and dispute resolution). In Q4-2023, CBOs provided case assistance to **consumers**, for financial and other needs (e.g., CARE/LifeLine or other financial assistance programs), or with utility disputes. CBOs also provide education on a range of topics to assist them in managing their utility services. The TEAM program helped consumers resolve disputes with their telecommunications provider.

The most recent TEAM and CHANGES contract was awarded to the non-profit organization Self-Help for the Elderly (SHE) from June 7, 2019, to June 6, 2024. TEAM is authorized for an annual budget up to **\$1.6 million**, and CHANGES is authorized up to **\$1.68 million** per year. A Request for Proposals has been issued for a new TEAM and CHANGES contract, as the current contract term comes to an end on June 30, 2024. CAB expects to have a new contractor to be selected and in place for both programs by July 1, 2024.