
**SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY, UTILITIES AND
COMMUNICATIONS**

**Senator Steven Bradford, Chair
2023 - 2024 Regular**

Bill No: SB 705 **Hearing Date:** 4/10/2023
Author: Ashby
Version: 3/20/2023 Amended
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** Yes
Consultant: Sarah Smith

SUBJECT: Utility workers: harassment: public campaign

DIGEST: This bill requires the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) to develop a public awareness campaign to discourage assault and harassment of utility workers.

ANALYSIS:

Existing law:

- 1) Requires the CPUC to administer a safety enforcement program for gas and electrical corporations, which must include monitoring, data tracking and analysis, investigation, and the issuance of citations. The goal of this program is to improve gas and electrical system safety through the enforcement of relevant laws and regulations. (Public Utilities Code §1702.5)
- 2) Establishes fines and penalties for individuals who commit assault and battery. Existing law specifies higher fines and penalties for individuals who assault or batter certain professionals in the commission of their duties, including, parking control officers, traffic officers, peace officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, paramedics, lifeguards, process servers, physicians, code enforcement officers, animal control officers, and search and rescue officers. (Penal Code §241)

This bill:

- 1) Requires the CPUC to work with electrical corporations, gas corporations and relevant unions to conduct a five-year statewide public information campaign to prevent harassment towards and assault of utility workers and contractors.
- 2) Requires the CPUC to conduct the campaign online, on different media platforms, and in specified public spaces, such as parks, public transit stops, and sidewalks.

- 3) Requires the CPUC to develop culturally relevant content, conduct the campaign in multiple languages in order to reach limited-English-proficient populations, and use media serving specific ethnic communities.
- 4) Requires the CPUC to annually evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign created under this bill and publish this evaluation on the CPUC's website. This bill requires this evaluations to include information occurrences of utility worker harassment, describe the campaign's activities, effectiveness, identify obstacles, and provide plans for how the CPUC will address those obstacles in the remaining years of the campaign.
- 5) Requires the CPUC to use fines collected from electrical corporations and gas corporations to fund the development and implementation of the campaign and annual evaluation.

Background

Utility worker harassment has been a long-standing issue. As workers that frequently interface with the public during challenging circumstances, utility workers have long faced threats, harassment, and assault during their commission of their work. For example, in 2022, a Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) worker was stabbed while marking gas lines in San Francisco. In a separate incident in 2022, a driver shouted racist abuse at and physically assaulted a San Diego Gas and Electric (SDG&E) worker controlling traffic around a repair site. In both these incidents, the individuals who committed the assaults were apprehended and faced criminal charges.

While there is no centralized tracking of harassment towards utility workers, it is possible that utility worker harassment has been exacerbated by increasing consumer angst at large scale utility issues, including utility ignitions of catastrophic wildfires, long-term power outages, and increasing bills. Some residents are unable or unwilling to disassociate utility line workers and contractors from their concerns with the larger management of electrical and gas corporations.

This bill differs from past legislation on the same issue by focusing on public education. In the past, the Legislature has heard several measures aimed at increasing criminal penalties for assault and battery of utility workers. This bill differs from those bills by requiring the CPUC to establish a public information campaign to discourage harassment of utility workers. As a result, this bill focuses on leveraging public awareness about utility worker harassment to limit the degree to which utility workers and contractors face these incidents.

The CPUC has engaged in public outreach campaigns in the past; however, some of the most widely distributed and effective campaigns have been conducted by the utilities themselves. For example, Southern California Edison's "Safety Squirrel" campaign created content in multiple languages using an animated squirrel to help kids and the general public understand basic utility safety tips, including the dangers of mylar balloons hitting power lines. Southern California Gas, SDG&E, and PG&E have all conducted campaigns in recent years for various purposes, including promoting demand response, solar water heating, emergency preparedness, and electric vehicle charging programs. While not overseen by the CPUC, the Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) conducted an extensive public information campaign about the utility's shift to time-of-use rates.

Need for amendments. As currently drafted, this bill requires the CPUC to fund this bill using fines collected from electric and gas corporations. However, it is unclear which fines would be used, and existing fines are generally already directed to specific accounts and funds. *As a result, the author and committee may wish to strike this bill's requirement to use fines to fund this bill's requirements.*

Prior/Related Legislation

SB 1416 (Bradford, 2020) would have established criminal penalties for individuals convicted of assaulting or battering a utility worker while the utility worker is in the commission of their job. The bill died in the Senate.

SB 513 (Bradford, 2017) would have established criminal penalties for individuals convicted of assaulting or battering a utility worker while the worker is in the commission of their job. The bill was vetoed.

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: Yes Local: No

SUPPORT:

Coalition of California Utility Employees, Sponsor
Engineers and Scientists of California, IFPTE, Local 20, AFL-CIO
Pacific Gas and Electric Company
San Diego Gas and Electric
Southern California Edison
Southern California Gas
Utility Workers Union of America

OPPOSITION:

None received

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: According to the author:

Over the last few years, utility workers have been the target of intense public anger towards utility companies even though the frontline workers do not make company decisions. These workers have experienced harassment, aggression and violence, including verbal threats, physical assaults, and even gun shots.

To protect our utility workers from public harassment and violence, SB 705 would require the Public Utilities Commission to create and implement a public education campaign on the increased frequency of aggression and violence towards utility workers and the importance of utility workers for safe and reliable electric and gas service.

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