

/ Up Close



Houston, Texas
Thursday May 26, 2005 8:39 p.m. CDT

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Up Close: Are you being overbilled for utilities? 📺

09:55 AM CDT on Thursday, May 26, 2005

By Dave Fehling / 11 News

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Water, gas, electricity ... your meters are running right now, but how accurate are your bills?

Sanford Dow is one of thousands of customers who feel they've been ripped off.

Dow explains that the water bill was outrageously high, as if someone was making it all up. "Yeah, that's what it certainly appeared to me."

What 11 News found was when it comes to you, the residential customer you are on your own. Nobody's independently checking to see if your utility meters work, or if the utility companies are doing an accurate job reading them and billing you.

Patricia Dolese says it's the consumer's responsibility to check.

Dolese used to handle customer complaints for the Texas Public Utility



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Commission.

The PUC regulates how much electric companies like Reliant charge, but has no systematic way of checking or auditing a company's metering and billing.

So does the PUC actually go out and do audits of companies?

"No, they probably wish they could, but they don't have the staffing resources to go out and do those kind of audits," says Dolese.

"We read 3 million meters a month," says James Sheppard of CenterPoint Energy.

CenterPoint Energy says its meter-reading is nearly 100 percent accurate.

"I don't think there's widespread inaccurate billing, no," says Sheppard.

But how do they know?

"I think we have 3 million customers that audit a month," says Sheppard.

So then is it really up to the customer to make sure that the bill seems to reflect accurately what they used?

"Sure, and I'm one of those customers," says Sheppard.

But consider this, big customers like school districts routinely pay consultants to check their bills.

HISD had it done a few years back and says its now saving more than a million dollars a year partly by getting inaccurate utility bills corrected.

But what about the rest of us?

"I think people are being overbilled," says Katie Dorfman, who works for Houston council member Michael Berry. They investigated complaints that the city's water department was overcharging.

"What we discovered was the meters weren't actually being individually read. And Katie in our office actually went out and looked at meters," says Berry.

"And when you went back in and looked at the records, you'd see that

nobody had read the meter for several months," says Berry.

"So we believe they were estimating it ... that is our concern," says Berry.

By law, utilities can occasionally estimate your usage, but at some point, a real reading is supposed to be taken and the bill adjusted accordingly.

That's what the city's water department says it does. CenterPoint says it estimates some 60,000 electric bills a month.

And when real readings are eventually taken, it uses hand-held computers that are programmed to catch readings that are way off, usually the fault of meter reader.

The chance it's the meter itself is "very, very, very low," says Dr. B. Don Russell with Texas A&M.

He's one of the nation's leading meter experts.

"The electric meter that's on the back of your house is designed to last for decades," he says.

In fact, if anything, he says old meters sometimes run slow, showing you're using less than you actually are. So think twice before asking for a new one.


All that said, mistakes do happen


Sanford Dow says he fought with the water department, but finally gave up and paid a \$1,300 bill.

"I figured I needed to shower every day and move on with my life," he says.

A dissatisfied customer who believes some of his utility bills were more fiction, than fact.

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