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Connecticut residents still in the dark days after Isaias, as officials criticize utility companies' storm response

The outages have left many residents seeking out public facilities to charge their devices, shower and get out of the heat.



— A fallen tree is seen in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Isaias in Newtown, Conn., on Aug. 4, 2020.

Dan Burns / Reuters

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By Olivia Roos

MADISON, Conn. – Nearly half a million utility customers in Connecticut remained without power Friday, three days after Tropical Storm Isaias ripped through the state.

Public officials say Connecticut's two main energy companies, Eversource Energy and United Illuminating, weren't ready for the storm – and an investigation is being launched to understand what went wrong.

Some reports estimate that it will take more than a week to fully restore power.

Eversource, the larger of the two energy companies, had projected that no more than [375,000 customers](#) would lose power. The company's actual total was about double the projection.

"Eversource was shockingly unprepared for this storm," said Sean Scanlon, a Democratic state representative from Guilford.

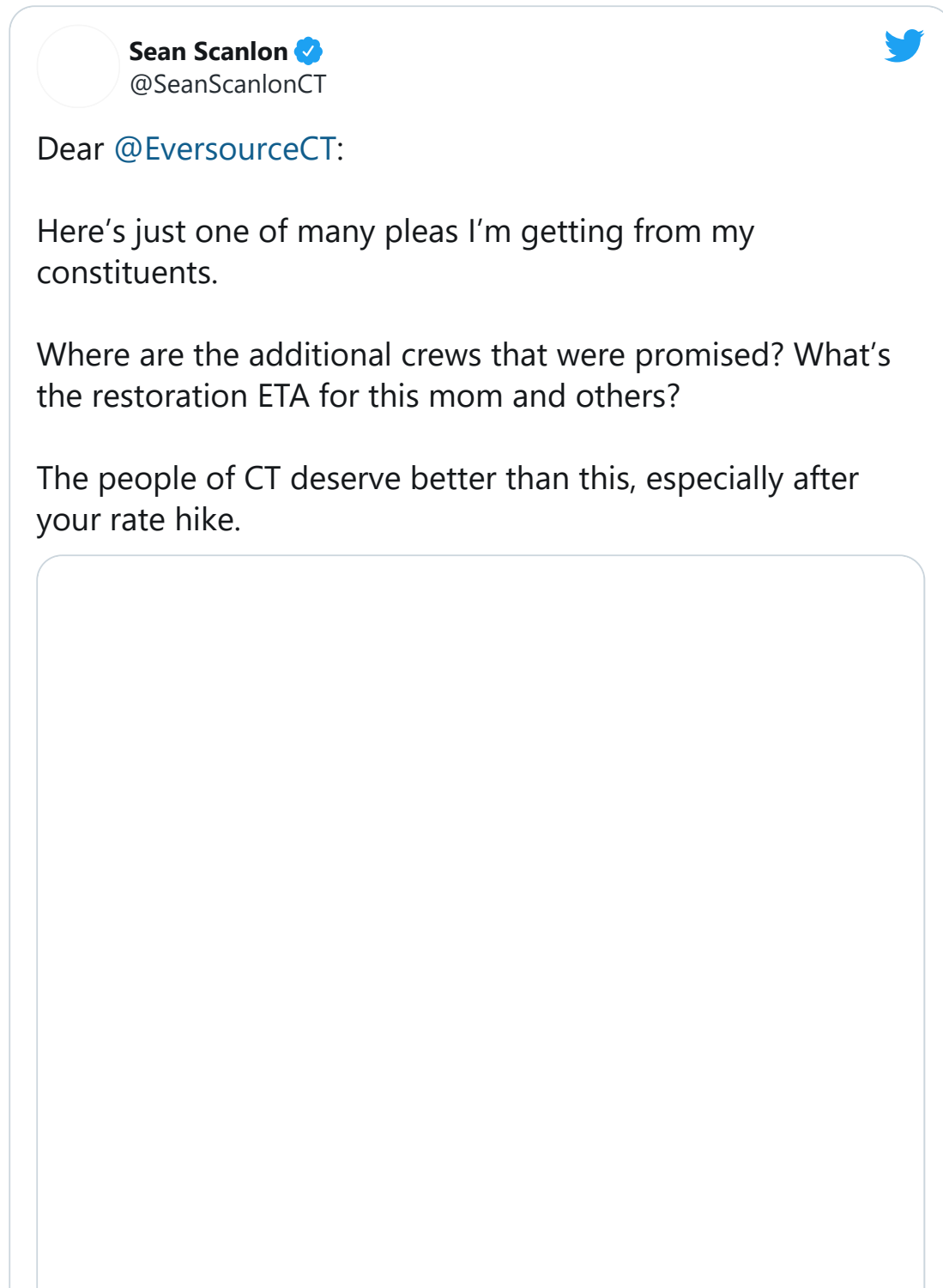
Tropical Storm Isaias leaves millions without power



The outages have left many residents without backup generators to seek out public facilities to charge their devices, shower and get out of the heat. But the accommodations come with public interaction that many people have avoided in recent months because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"You're seeing more and more people having to make the impossible choice between staying in their hot house with no food or going to a shelter in the middle of a global pandemic," Scanlon said.

People are "terrified" about being exposed to the virus, Scanlon said. He gets a text every couple of minutes from another resident begging for help while waiting for power to be restored.



In Simsbury, Jacquelyn Leopold and her husband, Sean Askham, have been without electricity and running water since Tuesday. The lack of running water is especially difficult because it means they're unable to mix formula for their newborn baby, Audrey.

"I get that they're busy. I get that there's a lot of life and safety issues out there, but no communication and understanding of when a crew is going to be in town, that's unacceptable," Askham told [NBC Connecticut](#).

In addition to shelters, water companies running on generators have asked residents to limit their water use, while cell towers are at risk of [running out of power](#).

Gov. Ned Lamont declared a state of civil preparedness emergency Wednesday and called on the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority, or PURA, to investigate the energy companies' "inadequate" responses.

"I'm asking PURA to begin this investigation so that we can determine whether the companies are meeting their legal obligations and whether any penalties need to be applied," Lamont said during a news conference outside Eversource headquarters in Berlin. "The people of Connecticut deserve better than the service they are receiving."



— Tropical Storm Isaias' heavy winds brought down numerous trees and power lines, resulting in widespread power outages across Connecticut, New York and New Jersey. *Olivia Roos*

Early Friday morning, more than 420,000 Eversource customers and 52,000 United Illuminating customers remained without power. Out-of-state repair crews have been called in with the goal of having full power restored statewide by Sunday.

"Our entire Eversource team is dedicated to this effort and is working with an extreme sense of urgency to get all of our customers the power they need," Craig Hallstrom, Eversource's president of regional electric operations, said in a news release.

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Hallstrom said Thursday that Eversource planned to have power restored for most of its customers [by the end of the weekend](#). But the pace of updates from both companies has been vexing for public officials.

"Their recent communication has a lot to be desired," said PURA's chairman, Marissa Paslick Gillett.

Gillett said energy companies are required to file prestaging memos before a tropical storm, a hurricane or another large-scale event is projected to take place. The memos project how many customers might lose power and tell PURA how many line crews they will need to deploy.

United Illuminating filed for a higher storm grade, at Level 3, while Eversource filed a Level 4 storm grade, expecting no more than 375,000 outages. The storm ended up being Level 2, with upward of 720,000 reported outages from the utility companies.

"We're one of the leaders in predictive modeling," Eversource media specialist Al Lara said. "But no one can really predict with exact certitude what will happen."

Eversource has spent [hundreds of millions of dollars](#) in recent years on infrastructure improvements and repairs to be better prepared for storms, according to the Hartford Courant. The funding came from customer rate payments, which have steadily been increasing over the decade.

The storm brought tropical-storm-force winds and possible tornadoes as it moved up the coastline Tuesday. The conditions downed numerous trees and power lines, resulting in widespread power outages across New York and New Jersey, as well as Connecticut. Like Lamont, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo called for an investigation, citing frustration at utilities' "failed storm response."

Isaias now ranks among the [worst power outage events](#) in recent state history.

Robert McCullough, the principal of the energy consultant firm McCullough Research, sees similarities between energy companies' preparations ahead of Isaias' arrival in Connecticut and the systemic problems that have contributed to deadly wildfires in California, such as [aging systems and equipment](#).

"People are going to have their lights go out more and more because the weather is changing," McCullough said. "A lot of the energy system's equipment is over 100 years old. We are going to have to reimagine our energy systems to adapt to new environmental systems."



Olivia Roos



Olivia Roos is a member of the NBC News Digital staff.

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