



CONSUMER AFFAIRS BRANCH

FIRST QUARTER REPORT

May 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 January through March 2021.

This report details:

- [CAB Returned More Than \\$634,000 to Consumers This Quarter](#)
- [CAB Assisted More than 1,400 Consumers with Resolving Utility Complaints in the First Quarter of 2021](#)
- [Consumer Contacts Have Remained Steady](#)
- [COVID-19 Impacts on Disconnections and Payment Arrangements Decreased](#)

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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 \$634,000 to Consumers This Quarter

In the first quarter, consumers were reimbursed **\$634,073** 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.

TABLE 1. CONSUMER REFUNDS BY INDUSTRY¹, FIRST QUARTER 2021

Industry	Refund Amount
Communications	\$112,017
Energy	\$508,292
Water	\$13,764
Totals	\$634,073

First Quarter Consumer Refund Highlights

- A not-for-profit organization received a refund of **\$300,000** from Just Energy Solutions Incorporated after CAB intervened.

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

- CAB’s assistance resulted in California American Water Company adjusting a consumer’s bill in the amount of **\$8,239**.
- With CAB’s assistance, a consumer received a credit of **\$2,175** from AT&T Mobility to cover upgrade fees, late payment fees, and service restoral fees.

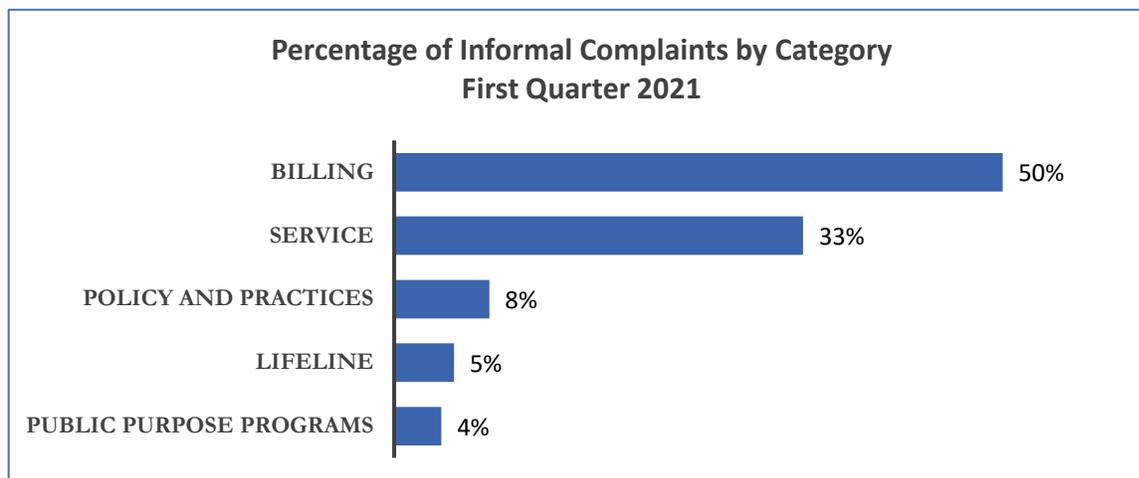
CAB Assisted More Than 1,400 Consumers with Resolving Utility Complaints in the First Quarter of 2021

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 **1,449** Informal Complaints in the first quarter. The number of Informal Complaints for Q1 2021 compared to Q4 2020 show an overall increase of 382 (36%) in the Informal Complaints resolved. We see an uptick in Informal Complaints from Q4 2020 to Q1 2021 attributed to the increased activity after the fall and winter holidays.

As noted on Page 2, many consumers have been assisted by CAB’s Informal Complaint process, particularly when it comes to billing issues. Across all industries, **50** percent of all Informal Complaints resolved were identified as billing issues, followed by service issues at **33** percent; see Chart 1. This breakdown of Informal Complaint issues is consistent with the ratios experienced in 2020.

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



TEAM and CHANGES

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

Support is provided statewide through **28** 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 first quarter of 2021, almost **2,200** 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 a slight increase of 3 percent from the previous quarter.

Approximately one-third more customers were provided case support in March, compared to February, which may be attributable to the easing of the pandemic related restrictions. In addition, almost 5,500 consumers were provided with education on a range of issues intended to support their ability to manage their services. This number has remained stable compared to the previous quarter when 5,650 consumers were provided education.

Consumer Contacts Have Remained Steady

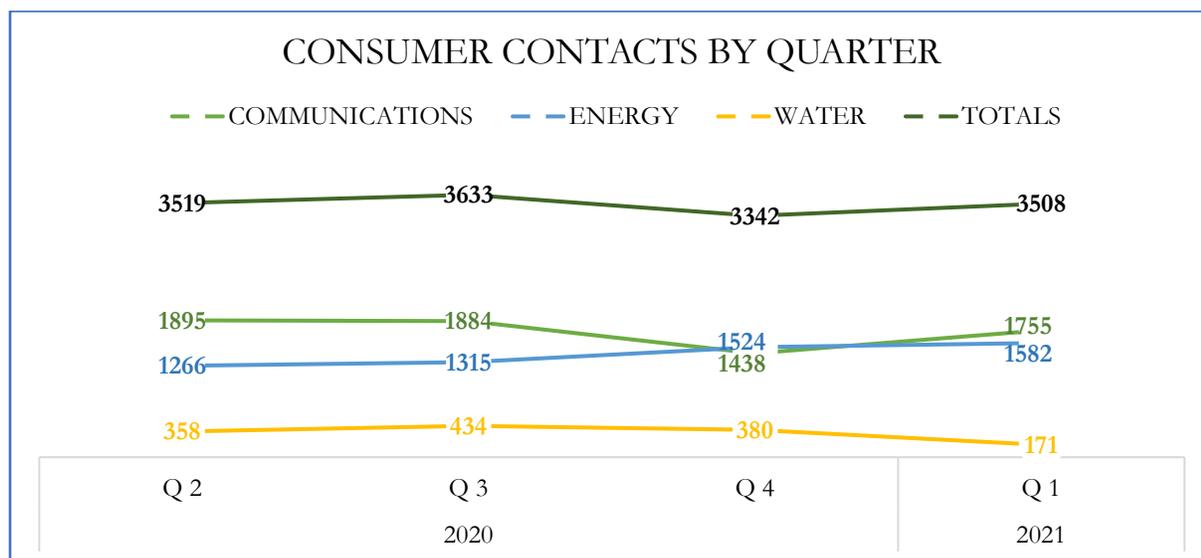
CAB’s team of representatives are responsible for assisting consumers with answering questions and resolving disputes with their utility providers. These contacts, which include Informal Complaints, are received via phone calls, letters, or the Internet. In the first quarter of 2021, CAB received **3,508** contacts.

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF CONSUMER CONTACTS, BY INDUSTRY, FIRST QUARTER 2021

Communications	1,755
Energy	1,582
Water	171
Total	3,508

Contacts remained steady over the last four quarters (see Chart 2. Consumer Contacts by Industry and by Quarter Q2 2020 thru Q1 2021). 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 – Q2 2020 THRU Q1 2021



Across all industries, billing issues accounted for **45** percent (with the High Bills subcategory at **55** percent of billing issues) of all contacts, followed by service issues at **21** percent. Approximately 42 percent of services issues are attributed to outages.

COVID-19 Impacts on Disconnections and Payment Arrangements Decreased

In the reporting period January 1, 2021- March 31, 2021 CAB received 44 contacts related to disconnections and 30 related to payment arrangements. The disconnection contacts continued to decline in the first quarter of 2021, indicating that the consumer protection measures are proving effective. CAB continues to monitor all disconnection cases, especially for any potential moratorium violations, and shares our findings with interested parties within the CPUC. CAB continues to assist consumers in need of payment arrangements, facilitating communication between the utility and the consumer who is under financial duress during the pandemic.

TABLE 3. COVID-19 RELATED DISCONNECTION AND PAYMENT ARRANGEMENT CONTACTS BY QUARTER

Quarter Comparison	Q2 2020	Q3 2020	Q4 2020	Q1 2021
Disconnection Non-Payment	81	67	66	44
Payment Arrangements	90	62	46	30
Totals	171	129	112	74