

Consumer Affairs Branch

FOURTH QUARTER REPORT-2021

February 2022



**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.

This report presents data obtained through inquiries and complaints received by the Consumer Affairs Branch (CAB) in the fourth quarter of 2021, as well as certain yearly totals.

This report details:

- [CAB Returned More Than \\$390,000 to Consumers in the Fourth Quarter of 2021](#)
- [CAB Received More Than 3,800 Phone and Written Contacts in Fourth Quarter of 2021](#)
- [CAB Assisted More Than 1,900 Consumers Resolve Utility Written Complaints in Fourth Quarter of 2021](#)
- [High Number of SCE Consumer Contacts in Fourth Quarter of 2021](#)

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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 and billing issues 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, supports enforcement against fraud and abuse, and informs the public.

CONSUMER REFUNDS – CAB Returned More Than \$390,000 to Consumers in Fourth Quarter of 2021

In the fourth quarter of 2021, consumers were reimbursed **\$391,580** 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 following CAB’s involvement. The average refund in 2021 by utility: Communications **\$470**, Energy **\$1,200**, Water **\$459**.

In 2021, CAB helped return to consumers \$1.9 million from utilities through the complaint process.

Table 1: 2021 - Consumer Refunds by Industry¹, Quarter and YTD

Industry	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
Communications	\$112,017	\$ 95,549	\$188,911	\$ 89,667	\$ 486,144
Energy	\$508,292	\$135,992	\$442,312	\$ 297,316	\$1,383,912
Water	\$ 13,764	\$ 3,060	\$ 4,282	\$ 4,597	\$ 25,703
Totals	\$634,073	\$234,601	\$635,505	\$ 391,580	\$1,895,759

Fourth Quarter Consumer Refund Highlights

- Through CAB’s intervention, Southern California Edison reduced a San Bernardino consumer’s bill by **\$28,569**.
- AT&T California refunded **\$13,477** to a Los Angeles business after CAB’s mediation.
- A consumer in Bakersfield had been out a town for several months but received an exorbitant water bill. After reaching out to CAB, the consumer received a credit of **\$1,457** from California Water Service Company.

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

CONSUMER CONTACTS – CAB Received More Than 3,800 Phone and Written Contacts in Fourth Quarter of 2021

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 fourth quarter of 2021, CAB received more than **3,800** phone and written contacts; see Table 2.²

In 2021, CAB assisted more than 15,000 consumers.

Table 2: Consumer Contacts by Industry, Quarter and YTD

Industry	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
Communications	1,755	1,657	1,449	1,665	6,526
Energy	1,582	1,803	2,979	2,032	8,396
Water	171	160	130	115	576
Totals	3,508	3,620	4,558	3,812	15,498

Consumer contacts remained stable in the fourth quarter of 2021, and for most of 2021, due in part to consumer protections enacted by the CPUC and other governmental agencies; see Figure 1. below. The exception being in the third quarter of 2021 where contacts peaked due to Southern California Edison billing issues (discussed below).

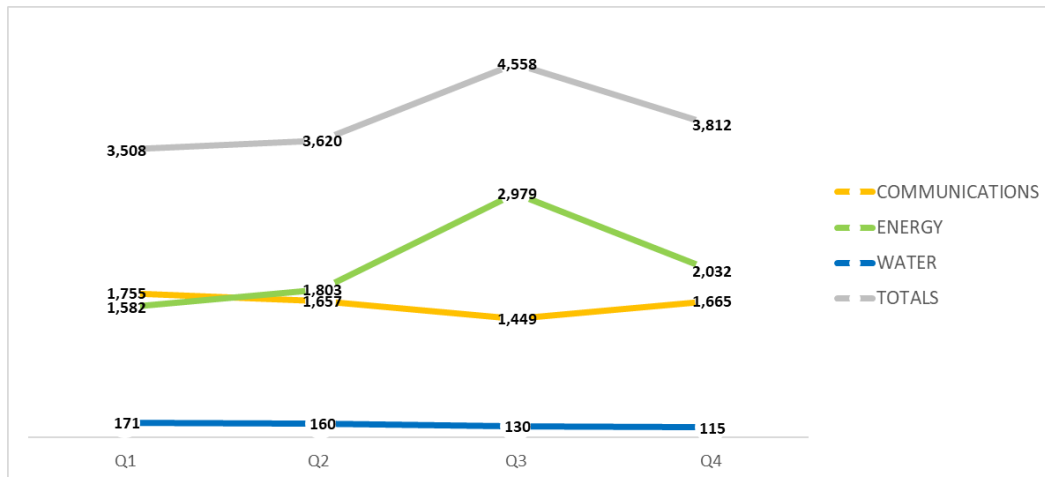


Figure 1: Consumer Contacts by Industry and Quarter

² Customers contact CAB over the phone and through written means (e.g., email, fax, and letter). Only written contacts may be a complaint. If a customer phones CAB with issues that cannot be dealt with over the phone, then the customer is advised to formalize the issue in writing as a complaint.

In the fourth quarter of 2021, billing issues accounted for **39** percent of the contacts across all industries and Not Regulated – No Jurisdiction issues accounted for **24** percent of all contacts, see Figure 2.

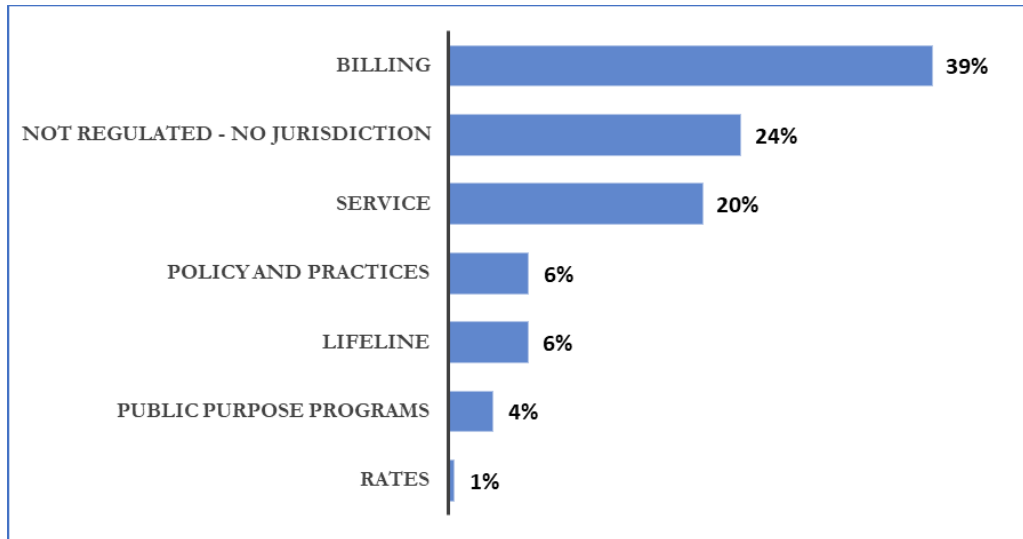


Figure 2: Q4 - Percentage of Consumer Contacts by Category

CONSUMER COMPLAINTS RESOLVED - CAB Assisted More Than 1,900 Consumers Resolve Utility Written Complaints in Fourth Quarter of 2021

CAB’s Informal Complaint process allows consumers an easily accessible way to resolve disputes with their utility, CAB accepts complaints in writing. In contrast to the CPUC’s Formal Complaint process, the Informal Complaint process does not require a formal proceeding or Administrative Law Judge oversight. In the fourth quarter of 2021, CAB resolved **1,949** Informal Complaints and **6,008** for all of 2021, see Table 3.

Table 3: Informal Consumer Complaints Resolved by Quarter and YTD

Industry	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
Communications	694	458	438	497	2,087
Energy	700	904	716	1,392	3,712
Water	55	51	43	60	209
Totals	1,449	1,413	1,197	1,949	6,008

The level of Informal Complaints remained stable for most of 2021, see Figure 3. The marked increase in the number of energy provider Informal Complaints resolved in the fourth quarter can be attributed to the third quarter increase in Consumer Contacts associated with Southern California Edison’s billing system.

The volume of Informal Complaints to Southern California Edison in the third quarter created a backlog in their response time. CAB’s management team extended the response dates and continues to meet with Southern California Edison weekly to resolve this and other issues as needed.

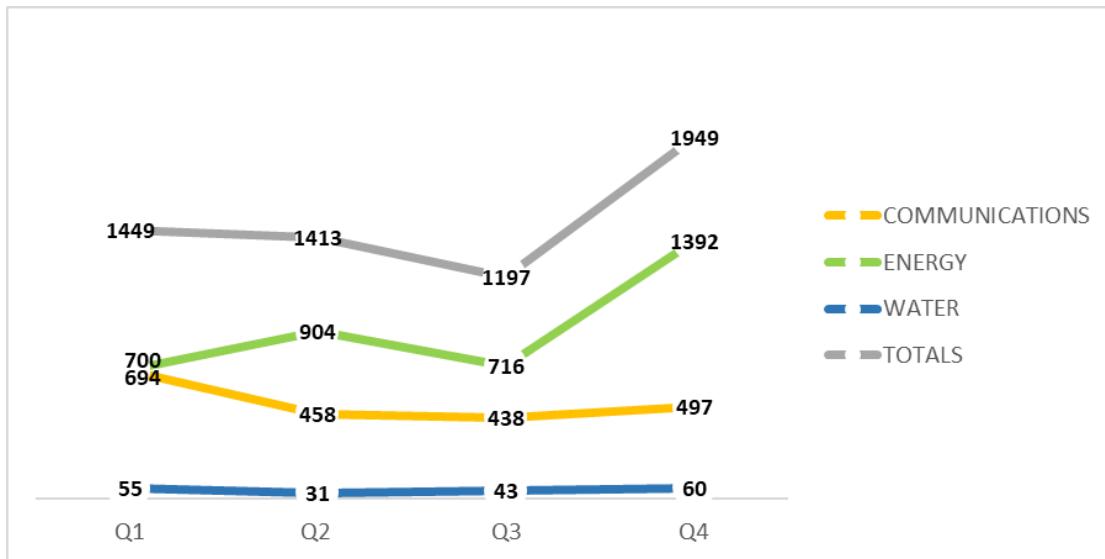


Figure 3: Informal Complaints by Industry and Quarter

Across all industries in the fourth quarter of 2021, 55 percent of all Informal Complaints resolved were identified as billing issues, followed by service issues at 34 percent, see Figure 4.

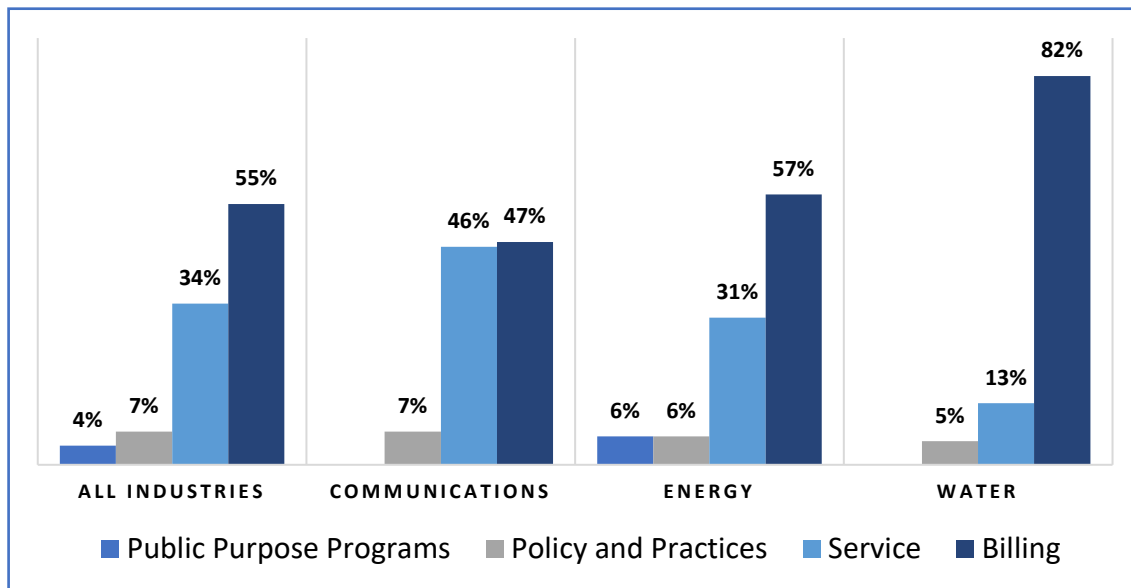


Figure 4: Percentage of Informal Consumer Complaints by Category and Industry in Fourth Quarter of 2021

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA EDISON - High Number of Consumer Contacts in Fourth Quarter of 2021

In the fourth quarter of 2021, Southern California Edison customers contacted CAB **1,938** times representing an increase of **8** percent over the previous quarter due to Southern California Edison’s billing system issues. However, Southern California Edison's billing system problems may be improving as shown in the Figure 5 below, but two months of data are not enough information to point to a trend. The month of December typically results in fewer contacts to CAB overall because of the holidays. If Southern California Edison’s customer contacts continue to decrease during the first quarter of 2022, CAB will acknowledge a downward trend.

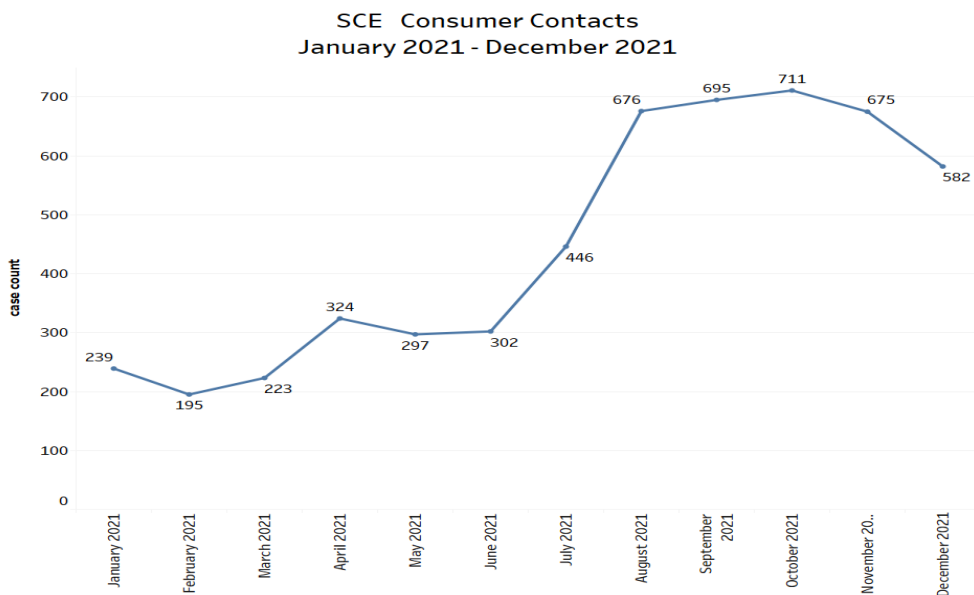


Figure 5: SCE Consumer Contacts January 1 – December 31, 2021

Table 4 below shows statistics relevant to Informal Complaints (ICs) sent to Southern California Edison during the first three quarters of 2021, the fourth quarter of 2021, and 2021 in total. The data indicates that Southern California Edison is still experiencing difficulty responding to ICs sent by CAB but appears to be improving since allocating additional resources to resolve its’ complaint backlog. Utilities should respond to an IC within 30-calendar days from the date CAB sent the IC. Southern California Edison experienced trouble responding to ICs timely resulting in almost **1,500** extensions granted to give Southern California Edison more time to resolve complaints. On November 29, 2021, CAB notified Southern California Edison that it will no longer grant extensions and advised Southern California Edison that cases exceeding the due date would reflect “Granted Extension Expired” and “No Response”. After that notification, Southern California Edison deployed additional resources and improved their response time returning ICs to CAB.

Table 4: Utility Response Statistics to ICs – January 1 thru December 31, 2021

SCE's Utility Response Statistics 2021			
Measure	Jan. 1, 2021 thru Sept. 30, 2021	4 th Quarter 2021	All 2021 as of Dec. 31, 2021
Number ICs Sent to Utility	1,633	561	2,194
Number Utility Responses Received	1,062	968	2,030
Number Extensions Granted	1,139	348	1,487
Number of Open IC's	570	849	849
Date of Oldest IC sent with no utility response	June 17, 2021	Aug. 3, 2021	Aug. 3, 2021
Average Utility Response Interval in Calendar days	42	72.6	54.3

CAB monitored Southern California Edison ICs as of 1/19/2022, and CAB data shows **595** open Southern California Edison ICs, with **299** of them still awaiting a response from SCE, which decreased by **550** cases from the open cases as of 12/31/2021. As Southern California Edison continues to reduce its IC backlog it should reduce numbers of incoming billing complaints, which will show that the underlying problems are being fixed.

Figure 6 below breaks out consumer contacts by subcategory and shows that in the fourth quarter of 2021 the billing categories remain Southern California Edison’s dominant issue. The High Bill subcategory remains the primary issue for consumers, followed by Bill Not Received subcategory. While there appears to be a downward trend in the two billing system subcategories, the number of these complaints remain high, and continued monitoring of incoming complaints will show whether they resolve the underlying billing problems, the complaint backlog, or both.

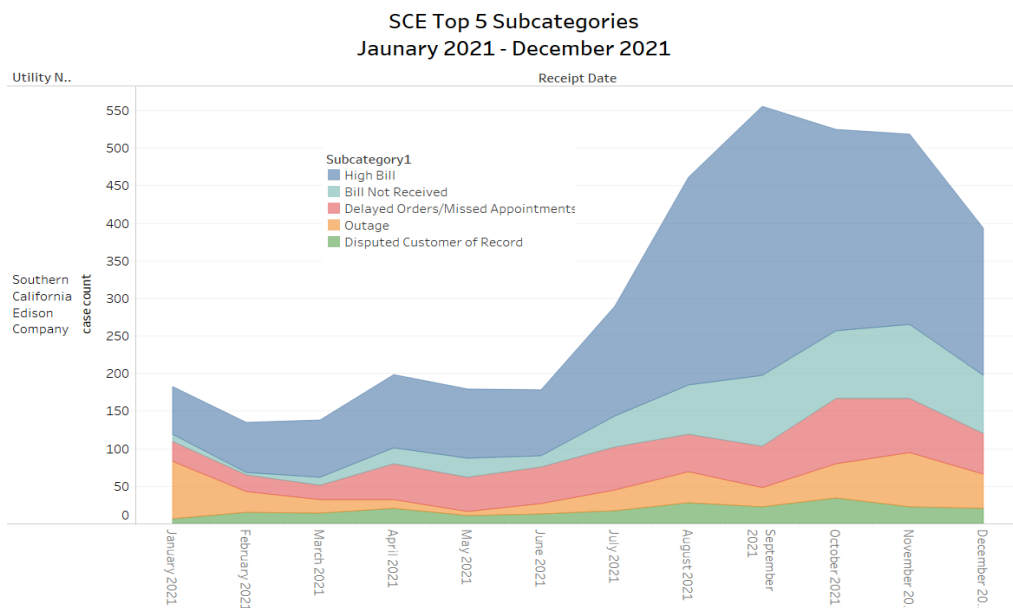


Figure 6: SCE Top 5 Contact Subcategories January 2021 – December 2021

Conclusion

The CIMS data indicates that SCE may be turning the corner solving the problems related to its billing system cutover. The excessive delay in resolving the billing system problems results in declining customer service. SCE increased efforts to ensure correct billing and contacting all its customers to explain the delay in responding and to resolve the informal complaints.

While there are indications that SCE is making progress towards resolving its complaint backlog, it is still not clear when SCE will fully resolve the billing system related problems. CAB will actively monitor the closure of the billing issues and follow up in its next quarterly report.

LIFELINE

In the fourth quarter of 2021, CAB received **275** California LifeLine contacts, which is a **13 percent** decrease from the prior quarter. CAB has dedicated specialists to assist consumers in answering inquiries and questions related to the LifeLine program. In addition, CAB also reviews appeals filed by consumers who were disqualified by the program administrator to participate in the program. CAB also facilitates review of LifeLine billing issues by service providers for investigation and resolution as necessary.

Table 5: LifeLine Contacts

LifeLine Case Types	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
Phone contacts received	112	111	145	106	474
Written contacts received	128	195	170	169	662
Total Contacts Received	240	306	315	275	1,136
Total LifeLine Appeals Closed	130	147	164	121	562
Total LifeLine Billing Cases Closed	142	130	182	140	594

TEAM AND CHANGES

In addition to the customer 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 customers statewide through **27** Community Based Organizations (CBOs) in their preferred language focused on cultural sensitivity. The CBOs provide consumer outreach, education, needs assistance, and dispute resolution.

In the fourth quarter of 2021, CBOs provided case support to **2,216** customers(**9,374** consumers for all of 2021) for financial, other needs (e.g., CARE/LifeLine, or other financial assistance programs), and utility disputes. In addition, CBOs led programs that educated **10,680** customers in the fourth quarter of 2021

(34,393 consumers for all of 2021), on a range of topics³ to assist consumers with managing their utility services.

Finally, the TEAM program helped customers through dispute resolution with their telecommunications provider to successfully reclaim \$31,746 in the fourth quarter of 2021(\$113,525 for all of 2021).

Table 6: CBO Case Support and Education Services Provided and Amount Recovered

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	YTD
Individual Case Support	2,200	2,275	2,683	2,216	7,158
Education Provided	5,500	9,677	8,536	10,680	34,393
Amount Recovered (TEAM)	\$22,137	\$34,319	\$25,323	\$31,746	\$113,525

³ <https://www.cpuc.ca.gov/about-cpuc/divisions/news-and-public-information-office/consumer-affairs-branch/team-and-changes-programs> (see heading “Educational Brochures in Different Languages”)