

Retailers check medically dependent customers following quake

Felicity Wolfe - Wed, 23 Nov 2016

Electricity suppliers rushed to check how their medically dependent customers were following their emergency plans in the hours following last week's magnitude 7.8 earthquake.

Retailers contacted by *Energy News* confirmed that most of their customers in this category had "robust" plans in place, but raised concerns about the few which did not.



Trustpower customer experience manager Fiona Smith says that only three of that firm's affected customers were without power and had evacuated following the Monday morning event.

While 70 per cent of those contacted had "really solid" plans to cope if their power failed, "about 30 per cent didn't have a robust plan in place despite advising us they did".

While they had developed contingency strategies with their district health boards on leaving hospital, things had changed since, she says. Events such as a partner dying, or people moving house, had left gaps in their plans.

The Electricity Retailers' Association of New Zealand plans to assemble case studies from the disaster to help provide insights into things which can be improved. These will be shared with the sector, chief executive Jenny Cameron says.

Improving the understanding of customers, especially medically dependent and vulnerable customers, that they need to have a back-up plan in place, and what one looks like, will be a key part of the lessons, she says.

Life support planning

Medically dependent customers are those who need mains electricity supply for medical support equipment such as ventilators, oxygen concentrators and ventricular assistance devices, and where the loss of electricity may result in loss of life or serious harm, according to the Electricity Authority.

Other customers may also need electricity for non-medical equipment, such as microwaves to heat fluids for renal dialysis.

The industry already cooperates to ensure that best practice is followed for medically dependent customers. Reminders about emergency outage planning are generally sent out annually. Retailers are also working with the Ministry of Health to make further improvements on ensuring that back-up plans remain useful, Smith says.

Trustpower checked 115 of its customers listed as medically dependent from Wellington down to North Canterbury to see if they were okay and had an emergency plan.

While only a few consumers had no workable plan in place, many of those whose power stayed on following the initial quake had not considered that aftershocks or repairs to lines could cause further outages.

"They may or may not be safe and they really should be thinking about how they would implement that plan."

Andrew Peckham, Mercury's customer group head of operations, says about 40 customers were contacted in the immediate area affected by the quake.

"Generally we found a very good level of preparedness, and also a few customers who were quickly forming a plan after the event."

Genesis Energy spokesperson Richard Gordon says about 700 of their medically dependent customers were called following the quake and all were ok. About 600 of them were in the Wellington region.

Advice, safety

Mercury's Peckham says the customers appreciate the proactive contact. Often the customers are elderly and living alone, "so it's great if our team are able to help".

“The call is really to check each customer is safe, ensure they have a plan in place if outages are on-going and check that they know how to access relevant outage information.”

Mercury’s advice to these customers is to call 111 if there is an urgent situation when there is an outage. In an emergency the firm can help by making this call on a customer’s behalf.

For non-urgent situations, Mercury recommends that medically dependent customers stay with friends, family or seek help from their health provider.

“Our team is well equipped to talk through these options with the customer.”

Peckham says the firm carried out similar checks following the 2011 Christchurch earthquake and the 2014 Penrose substation fire.

Community support

Retailers have also been working to support the communities most affected by earthquakes, including Mercury’s offer of a ‘free power day’ to all its customers in the Kaikoura region, Peckham says.

As well as checking on medically dependent customers, Contact Energy is also offering additional support to customers and communities in the worst affected areas, chief customer officer Vena Crawley says.

That includes providing free LPG for Kaikoura refuge centres, such as marae and churches, sending water supplies and assisting its LPG suppliers to return to operations.

Contact, the largest retailer on the MainPower network, is tailoring support to customers badly affected by the quakes to their individual needs, Crawley says. The firm has empowered its staff to offer bill holidays in the form of account credits, flexibility around payments and fees, and free LPG for cooking.

He says that call centre staff have had “heartwarming and emotional” conversations with customers, including a fire fighter badly impacted by the quake personally who has been putting in “huge hours helping in the community”. Contact offered a bill holiday to help ease the burden.

Crawley says the firm will also help business customers in these areas get back on their feet in the months ahead.

Smith says that after completing checks on medically dependent customers last Monday morning, Trustpower is now calling on all its other customers around Kaikoura.

That is giving the firm a good idea of the damage to property and power connections. Trustpower has been clearing some final accounts for those who’ve had to leave properties so they don’t need to worry about them.

She says there are also great stories of people “just getting on with it”. One customer whose land was lifted about a metre says he now has a sea view.