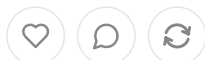


The Christensens are one of 12 WPS customers that refuse new smart meters - now they're adapting to life without power



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NOV 11, 2023



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This story first appeared in City Pages. I wanted to republish it here with some notes and updates:

- *Since the story published, a couple of people reached out about donating to them. I asked Jennifer about it and she refused any help. That's not why she wanted to share her story - she just wanted to make people aware of the situation and how WPS forces customers to accept smart meters, despite objections. I thought that showed a great deal of integrity.*
- *Other than that, I didn't get much feedback on the story. As I explained to my new protege, Devon, we dig for the truth but also have to acknowledge the limitations of our abilities. I explained our role in this story was to highlight the fact that there are a handful of people in the state refusing smart meters, and this one family in particular was willing to essentially live a life without power because of how the smart meter might affect John.*
- *I didn't include it in the story but apparently the Journal-Sentinel was also interested in the story but backed off, because they saw some research that questioned Electro-Magnetic Hypersensitivity. To me, they missed my point above. The story was still well worth reporting - that there are a dozen holdouts to the new smart meters, and that at least one of them is willing to live with limited electricity, to me is an interesting story. But also that WPS has a tremendous amount of power, as seen from our previous story about*

WPS and how it refused to move lines from above a man's house that WPS lines previously burned down.

With that, enjoy the story.

Jennifer Christensen and her husband John have been living in the town of Berlin without electricity since Oct. 1. And it's not because they didn't pay their bill. Christensen says she's never missed a payment or even been late with some of her payments to the power company.

They're using generators for heat and an inverter attached to a Freightliner truck for a limited amount of electricity, such as to run the ice chests, and some of it spoils because they don't have a freezer.

Why? John has what Jennifer says is a rare condition called electromagnetic hypersensitivity. It's a condition that's been around for years ago. Besides losing his hearing (he must now wear a hearing aid), Jennifer says he suffers from wireless radiation sickness.

Therapists didn't know what was wrong at first, Jennifer says. He figured out that whenever John was near anything electronic, he got sick.

Since they live in a rural area — the town of Berlin is about 20 miles from Chicago and the Maple Grove Elementary School — their nearest neighbor is half a mile away, and they don't have a cell tower in their house. A DSL cable allows them to have internet access without any wire.

John actually got back to work after recovering from his crash, Jennifer says. But the sickness began again shortly thereafter. John would come home from work debilitated, she says, and would lay on the floor the entire evening. His neck where he was injured in the crash would swell.

Eventually they figured out the problem. They were 23 miles from a major WPS building.

He quit that job and went back to work in his old job in a rural area with no towers. And he feels fine now, she says.

So they thought they had everything figured out, until they learned Wisconsin Public Service wanted to replace their old meter with a smart meter and a wireless transmitter that would automatically send their meter readings to the power company.



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The Christensens are against that, of course. They've taken great pains to remove anything wireless from their house, because of the sickness they say it causes. They offered to take a photo of the meter every month and send it in. But WPS wasn't having it.

The Christensens said they've sent a certified letter from their healthcare provider explaining why John can't have a smart meter, both last year and this year.

Jennifer says they even put a lock on the meter — a tactic other people claiming a medical exemption have done.

Last year a technician came out to the house, Jennifer says. He said they needed to take the lock off the meter so he could install the smart meter, she said. She explained to him about her husband's radiation sickness and according to her account he said he would have to do some research.

The technician left without installing the meter.

They received a disconnect letter in April saying their power would be shut off if they did not allow the meter to be installed.

They don't want to live without electricity — the Christensens have six children, and youngest is about to turn four years old. But they firmly believe that the radiation from the smart meter will cause John to get ill.

WPS response

City Pages reached out to WPS to ask some questions about the smart meters. WPS Spokesperson Matthew Cullen says of their 461,000 electric customers and about 3/4 of that in gas customers, they have 12 people who they say "we are continuing to work with on upgrading their meters" he says. Cullen says they offer those customers to move the meters to another part of the property, away from the house.

Cullen told City Pages he didn't think Jennifer gave the publication an accurate count, but didn't offer any rebuttal to the facts laid out to him.

He did say that the old meters are out of date, no longer supported by the manufacturers, and poses a potential safety hazard.

Cullen says the meters use the same frequency as everyday devices such as wifi, microwaves and garage door openers, but generally at even lower power than those devices.

Cullen didn't answer my questions about their specific policy around smart meters, and whether or not customers are able to opt out with a medical exemption. He

explained that the Public Service Commission in 2019 approved the infrastructure upgrade and that WPS is carrying out the upgrade as per PSC guidelines.

“This is my life now”

Cullen says the door isn't closed to reopening service. “Disconnection always has been and always will be a last resort — one that is taken after all other attempts to work with and assist a customer have not been successful, Cullen told City Pages. “We remain open to working with the Christensens on their home's energy service moving forward.”

But that will mean installing the smart meter. For the Christensens, that's not worth the cost of John's health, which they believe will severely suffer if the smart meter is installed. And installing the meter elsewhere on the property would cost \$6,000, Jennifer told City Pages.

The syndrome garnered enough attention that the World Health Organization took a look at it. According to a report by the WHO, Electromagnetic Hypersensitivity is found in about one in a million people, and about 10% of those cases are considered severe.

But controlled studies, according to the report, found that those with EHS were unable to detect electromagnetic fields any better than those without the syndrome. The study's authors suggested other environmental factors might be at play, or that it could be psychological.

But, WHO concludes, the symptoms are very real, according to the report. The report recommends:

- a medical evaluation to identify and treat any specific conditions that may be responsible for the symptoms,
- a psychological evaluation to identify alternative psychiatric/psychological conditions that may be responsible for the symptoms,
- an assessment of the workplace and home for factors that might contribute to the presented symptoms. These could include indoor air pollution, excessive noise, poor lighting (flickering light) or ergonomic factors. A reduction of stress and other improvements in the work situation might be appropriate.

John told City Pages that even a brief visit to their daughter and son-in-law's house recently left him in pain and he had to leave after some time.

During a visit by a reporter last week, John and his son were installing a new gas stove, since their electric stove wasn't really an option. Solar panels lined the garage, hooked

up to inverters to provide a small amount of electricity.

Inside they have an antique ice box Jennifer says is from 1900. They also have coolers outside with some food.

John plans to buy more solar panels to hook up outside. And they're learning to live off the grid.

It's their life now.

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