



Baker, Columbia Gas unveil massive recovery plan



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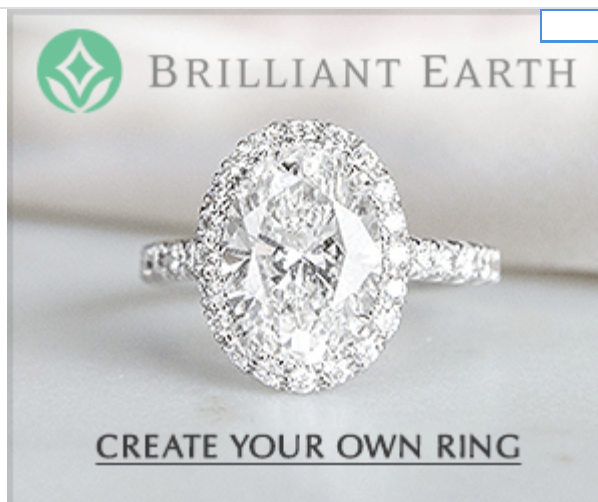
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LAWRENCE — Governor Charlie Baker on Friday said he is deploying the National Guard to the Merrimack Valley in a massive relief effort that will distribute thousands of hot plates and space heaters, and set an ambitious two-month timeline to rebuild the network damaged during last week's natural gas explosions.

Officials targeted Nov. 19 for restoring gas service to some 8,600 customers in Andover, Lawrence, and North Andover, as thousands of relief workers, construction workers, and translators race to restore service before the onset of cold weather.

"They say sometimes it takes an army, but in this difficult situation that couldn't be more true," Baker said during an hour-long news conference.

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At Baker's direction, Columbia Gas of Massachusetts hired a retired Navy Seabee, Joseph Albanese, to oversee the effort. Albanese served in the military for 28 years, working on construction projects in the Middle East. He runs a Waltham construction company that has built numerous local projects.

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Officials expect to have 195 crews at work by Oct. 8 to replace 48 miles of older, leak-prone gas pipes in the affected area.

The sheer scale of the response underscores the gravity of the undertaking. Thousands of residents, including some of the poorest in the state, cannot cook or take hot showers.

Hundreds of business are out of service, their employees without work. And the arrival of cold weather will exacerbate health and safety threats and worsen conditions for the pipe work.

"What can we do to get people back to normalcy?" said Mayor Dan Rivera of Lawrence. "It's not about fixing people, or fixing walls, or appliances. This is about getting people back to their normal lives."

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Meanwhile the Globe has learned that the US attorney in Boston is investigating the cause of the explosions.

The aid effort begins Saturday, when soldiers from the National Guard will deliver the first of 7,000 hot plates in Lawrence; residents of North Andover and Andover can get theirs at local claims centers. Some 24,000 space heaters will be available Monday. Firefighters and electricians will first inspect homes to determine if they can be safely used.

Baker said Columbia Gas will cover the higher electric bills expected from the use of the equipment.

Fire safety experts expressed concern about the number of space heaters, especially in older, more densely settled neighborhoods where outdated electrical systems are more likely.

“With that many going out, there are going to be problems. It’s the law of averages,” said retired Revere fire chief Gene Doherty. And Lorraine Carli of the National Fire Protection Association warned that the hot plates can be a danger.

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“In general, cooking is a leading cause of home fires,” said Carli. “The big safety message there is to pay attention if you’re cooking. And keep anything that can catch fire . . . away from the stovetop.”

Rita O’Callaghan, who lives near the Chickering Road site where 18-year-old Leonel Rondon was killed, is wary of using space heaters and wants to convert to propane gas during the outage.

“I’m just afraid of the house burning down,” said O’Callaghan. “It’s just too dangerous.”

Local fire chiefs said firefighters and electricians will check electrical systems and fire and carbon monoxide alarms at homes with space heaters. Code inspectors will also check before gas is restored.

More than 80 fires and explosions rocked the Merrimack Valley on Sept. 13, killing one man, injuring two dozen, and forcing the evacuation of thousands of residents for several days. Columbia Gas has been replacing older cast-iron and steel pipes in the area, as part of a multiyear campaign by utilities to eliminate thousands of gas leaks across the state.

The catastrophe is under investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board, and officials have said they suspect the cause was excessive levels of pressure inside gas pipes.

NTSB spokesman Eric Weiss said investigators completed their last interview on scene and expect to issue a preliminary report next month, though it is not expected to rule on the cause of the explosions and fires.

Federal prosecutors are also investigating whether Columbia Gas could be held criminally liable under a

federal pipeline safety law that has been used to prosecute companies in other explosions around the country, according to an official who asked not to be named because the matter is confidential.

The head of the public corruption unit at the US attorney's office in Boston, Fred Wyshak, this week visited a construction site at South Union and Salem streets in Lawrence, where crews were performing work for Columbia Gas on Sept. 13.

Columbia declined to comment on the investigation. On Friday, Joe Hamrock, chief executive of Columbia parent NiSource Inc., said his company is cooperating with local and federal authorities.

"Our focus has been, since the incident, restoring life in the communities, focusing on understanding what happened, and to do all we can to rebuild confidence in our company," he said.

Columbia subcontractor Feeney Brothers confirmed its crews were interviewed by NTSB investigators, and said its workers did "nothing wrong."

"While the investigation will take time, we have no doubt that Feeney's crew will be found to have done their work professionally, safely, and correctly," Feeney Brothers spokeswoman Nancy Sterling said.

Feeney Brothers was working at South Union and Salem streets in Lawrence. The NTSB has said it is investigating construction work there, but stressed it remains unclear what, if any, role it played in the calamity.

Columbia Gas has been fined tens of thousands of dollars by Massachusetts since 2010 over gas leaks and other incidents, and other NiSource companies have been linked to serious blasts in two other states.

Meanwhile, multiple gas industry experts said the Nov. 19 deadline for restoring service was unrealistic.

"My concern, if you're doing that much work in that aggressive of a fashion, would be the quality of work, hence the importance of state oversight," said Jason Montoya, chairman of the National Association of Pipeline Safety Representatives and an official at the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission.

He said Columbia Gas and state officials need to closely scrutinize the crews hired for the work.

"I don't know that there's anyone available to just drop everything they're doing and go install 48 miles of pipe," he said. "I would really be cautious about the quality of the work.

Baker on Friday called the timeline "demanding but realistic," while Albanese pledged that "safety will be paramount."

Columbia Gas spokesman Scott Ferson insisted the company will have enough work crews to get the job done in time.

Weary Lawrence residents welcomed the relief effort, but expressed skepticism at the promise of speedy work. Glenny Acevedo, who has spent hundreds of dollars for a hotel in Peabody for her family, worries the system still won't be secure by Nov. 19.

"I don't want them to take longer," Acevedo said, "but I also want them to make sure everything is fine."

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