

**STATE OF ILLINOIS
ILLINOIS COMMERCE COMMISSION**

Illinois Commerce Commission, On Its Own)	22-0487
Motion)	
-vs-)	
Ameren Illinois Company d/b/a/ Ameren)	
Illinois)	
)	
Order Requiring Ameren Illinois Company to)	
file an Initial Multi-Year Integrated Grid Plan)	(cons.)
and Initiating Proceeding to Determine Whether)	
the Plan is Reasonable and Complies with the)	
Public Utilities Act.)	
)	
Ameren Illinois Company d/b/a Ameren Illinois)	23-0082
)	
Petition for Approval of a Multi-Year Rate Plan)	
pursuant to 220 ILCS 5/16-108.18.)	
)	

**DIRECT TESTIMONY OF CHAMA ST. LOUIS
ON BEHALF OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND**

EDF Ex. 2.0

May 11, 2023

1 **Q. Please state your name and where you live.**

2 A. My name is Chama St. Louis and I live in the Peoria, Illinois. My home is in the Sunset
3 Hills Neighborhood in Peoria County District 2 and I own a business located in Peoria
4 County District 4.

5 **Q. Tell us about yourself.**

6 A. I am a Lead Community Organizer, small business owner, Master Life Coach
7 Professional, and mom to three kids (16, 14, and 10 years old). I like helping people
8 individually and collectively. I have been an organizer and advocate since I was 18
9 because I understand the people power that is required to stand up to bullies. I also spent
10 12 years with the Illinois State Black Chamber of Commerce and a time as Chair of the
11 Peoria Chamber of Commerce learning the ins and outs of how to help entrepreneurship
12 and business success. I ran to be mayor of Peoria 2021 and am currently in school to
13 become a clinical hypnotherapist.

14 I currently organize with the National Black Worker Center, a national
15 organization that advocates for black workers to be treated with respect, paid fairly, and
16 teaches Black workers how to organize against discrimination in the workplace. My
17 current focus is on incubating new Black Worker Centers across the country. There are
18 currently thirteen of these local centers in place to mobilize Black workers. My work is
19 hands on - I developed and delivered a training program to build power and drive
20 outcomes. I also provide technical assistance, mentorship, and assess local needs and
21 program viability. My job is to train and educate low-wage Black workers on their rights
22 and how to advocate and organize their workplaces for better treatment. Until Black
23 workers are lifted, we're all going to fail.

24 I also own an aerial arts and dance studio that serves as an event space so I
25 understand the opportunities and challenges small business owners face day to day. I
26 opened right before the pandemic shutdown and experienced the anxiety of trying to keep
27 the business going.

28 **Q. On whose behalf do you submit this testimony?**

29 A. I am testifying on behalf of the Environmental Defense Fund.

30 **Q. Why was it important to you to provide testimony in this case?**

31 A. I have never had a good relationship with Ameren. I grew up in extreme poverty. Though
32 my dad had a union job, we had a large family and there wasn't enough money to go
33 around. We struggled to keep the lights on. Then I personally had a bill that followed me
34 around for about 10 years that got as high as \$6,000. My experience is that payment plans
35 only put you further behind. I was paying \$600 per month and when I had extra money
36 and would put a chunk down on the bill, it never seemed to make a difference. The next
37 bill would be higher. I couldn't get assistance when I needed it. Either the funds ran out
38 or there was a waiting list. And God forbid I miss the payment deadline by a day; then
39 it's even higher. At least during COVID there was some relief. If the power is
40 disconnected, you fall even further behind because of deposits and additional fees.

41 My boyfriend and I are probably considered middle class. We both work
42 professional jobs and contribute to the household. But the reality is that we are one
43 unexpected expense – one high Ameren bill away - from not being able to make ends
44 meet. And I don't qualify for assistance. I'm often trying to figure out how to make
45 money to stay above water. I can't imagine what it's like for others.

46 I'm watching people sink deeper into poverty after COVID. Black and Brown
47 people, who suffered the most from the effects of COVID, are suffering the most after
48 COVID. There is no rent control and rent is going up. People are dealing with landlords
49 that leave broken windows and property in disrepair that makes the energy bills even
50 higher. How do people live without utilities when they can't cook or have food in the
51 fridge?

52 I acquired a lifelong condition from having COVID myself. I developed two
53 blood clots in my brain and was on the stroke floor at the hospital. My speech was
54 slurred. I was in bad shape. I'm lucky that my employer was patient while I recovered or
55 I might be in a very different place. I will have to take blood thinners the rest of my life
56 due to the resulting blood clotting disorder. I know a lot of people in similar conditions.
57 Health conditions and work conditions (especially for so-called "non-essential" workers
58 during COVID) left people more vulnerable than before, with a lot of challenges that
59 stack on top of each other.

60 As someone who works to build people up, I see the struggle many experience for
61 basic needs. Many humans are vulnerable because of things they cannot control. I feel
62 Ameren is predatory. The rates just keep going up. I want the ICC to understand what
63 people are going through and how increases impact those who already struggle to get by.
64 It piles up. My social media feed is full of people that owe Ameren hundreds of dollars.

65 **Q. Have you ever contacted Ameren about the amount of your bill at home?**

66 A. Yes, I spent a lot of time on the phone with them talking about how to save money but
67 what they suggested were things I either couldn't do because I was renting the property
68 or it didn't help. It felt like the only option was to be cold in the winter and hot in the

69 summer. The bill constantly fluctuates and seems like it has only gone up since the
70 pandemic. The bill is in my boyfriend's name now, sometimes we don't look at it right
71 when it comes in because we're scared of what it will be. We're constantly on edge about
72 energy usage (did I turn the heat down, light off, etc.)

73 **Q. What types of resources did Ameren offer when you contacted?**

74 A. They told me they could help me get a controllable thermostat and suggested I unplug the
75 space heaters I was using to stay warm to save gas. They also suggested an energy audit.

76 **Q. Did those things help you?**

77 A. No. I live in an older house. It's drafty. In the winter the kitchen floor is freezing because
78 there is an opening to the outdoors under the sink. The HVAC doesn't work properly so
79 we have to set the thermostat really low for the air conditioning to make a difference and
80 really high for the heat to make a difference. There is no air or heat upstairs where the
81 bedroom is so we run space heaters in the winter and a window air conditioner we put in
82 ourselves in the summer.

83 What good is an audit if I don't have money to fix the things they find? And I rent
84 so it isn't even my property. Landlords only do the bare minimum and there is no
85 requirement that they do more. It feels like Ameren blames the victim instead of focusing
86 on what landlords can do or the fact that the rates are too high for so many people to
87 manage.

88 **Q. Has your experience been different for your business?**

89 A. It's not quite as bad as home but not good, mainly because we're usually only there a few
90 hours a week. It's electric only but we're typically there in the evening in the summer so

91 we avoid the hottest part of the day. My bill is still on average \$500 - \$700 a month for
92 about 6,000 square feet.

93 There they sent someone out for an energy audit at the studio. The contractor said
94 he was going to change the lightbulbs to LEDs and install a Nest thermostat but he never
95 came back. Ameren did say they would pay part of it, and I would have to cover the rest.
96 I knew the landlord wasn't going to help. It's been almost 5 months now. I've been in
97 contact with the representative I was working with several times and she said she would
98 check into it.

99 I appreciated that the contractor who came out was Black and someone I had used
100 for other work before. It is good business that he was local.

101 **Q. Do you have recommendations for changes that would benefit the people in your**
102 **community?**

103 A. Yes. First, prices should be set on a sliding scale based on income. Budget billing is
104 helpful but not enough for people in poverty. Second, I'd like to see Ameren contribute
105 more to assistance directly. They will refer you to LIHEAP and that helps people, but I
106 have seen Ameren sponsor things at the Chamber of Commerce to support businesses but
107 don't do the same for people. They could have a direct community impact on something
108 that is necessary for a basic quality of life.

109 Third, they should have payment plans available for small businesses. Currently
110 they will only do an extension that you have to request separately each time. It seems like
111 they're holding all businesses to the same standard but small businesses need more
112 leeway and tools. Part of starting a small business is to build generational wealth but they

113 make it so hard. Ameren should empower small businesses and take into consideration
114 things like how long they've been in business when making decisions.

115 Finally, I would like to see more community solar and the local jobs it can create
116 for Black workers in energy and green technology. Part of my work is trying to figure out
117 how to make sure people are trained to take advantage of opportunities like that. It's
118 important that Ameren engage with communities to make sure they're getting a share of
119 the work and providing grants to local organizations and colleges for training. Creating
120 local jobs while doing this work can have a lasting impact on those that are paying so
121 much for their bills.

122 **Q. Does that conclude your testimony?**

123 **A. Yes.**