

Pennsylvania Telephone Association

"The Communications
Leader in Pennsylvania"



June 15, 2020

Ms. Rosemary Chiavetta
Secretary
Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission
P.O. Box 3265
Harrisburg, PA 17105

Re: **M-2020-3020055**
COVID-19 Customer Service, Billing, and Public Outreach Provisions
Request for Utility Information
- *Hancock Telephone Company*

Dear Secretary Chiavetta:

In response to the Secretarial Letter dated May 29, 2020 at the above docket, please find the replies from the company noted above.

Sincerely,

Steven J. Samara
President

cc: Sarah Dewey (via email)
Tom Charles (via email)



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION
400 North Street, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120

IN REPLY PLEASE
REFER TO OUR FILE
M-2020-3020055

May 29, 2020

Re: COVID-19 Customer Service, Billing, and Public Outreach Provisions Request for Utility Information
Docket No. M-2020-3020055

To Whom It May Concern:

On March 6, 2020, Governor Tom Wolf issued a Proclamation of Disaster Emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (*Emergency Proclamation*).¹ On March 13, 2020, Gladys Brown Dutrieuille, Chairman of the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (Commission), issued an *Emergency Order*. The *Emergency Order* prohibits jurisdictional utilities from terminating service during the pendency of the *Emergency Proclamation* unless termination of service is necessary to ameliorate a safety emergency or unless otherwise determined by the Commission. The *Emergency Order* also encourages utilities to reconnect previously terminated service if such action could be done safely. *Public Utility Service Termination Moratorium Proclamation of Disaster Emergency- COVID-19*, Docket No. M-2020-3019244 (*Emergency Order* ratified on March 26, 2020) (*Emergency Order*). The restrictions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, including compliance with the *Emergency Proclamation*, and the *Emergency Order*, have affected the ways in which the utilities can interact with customers.

Accordingly, the Commission hereby directs the utilities to provide the following information to the PUC within 10 calendar days of the issuance of this Secretarial Letter.²

I. COVID-19 Utility Consumer Service and Billing Policies and Procedures

Describe and report efforts to support customers through initiatives in customer service and billing policies and procedures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing recovery period. Explain how these initiatives differ from normal operations:

HTC instituted the policy to cease all suspension following the initial order on March 13th. All late fees, we also waived. We signed on to the FCC's Keep America Connected program, so there have been no disconnects or late fees applied to any customer bills since the program has been in place. Any customers that have questions regarding these situations have been instructed by our customer service people as to how the program is working.

Termination of Utility Service:

¹ <https://www.governor.pa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/20200306-COVID19-Digital-Proclamation.pdf>

² Jurisdictional utilities have also been directed to track costs associated with COVID-19 and the *Emergency Proclamation* and the *Emergency Order* by Secretarial Letter dated May 13, 2020, at Docket No. M-2020-3019775.

- After the Commission’s Emergency Order on Terminations at Docket No. M-2020-3019244 ends, how soon does the utility plan to begin termination of service for nonpayment?
 - How does the utility plan to implement terminations and will it start the process with new termination notices?

New issues of balances will be issued, and customer service will work out arrangements that will work best for the customer. Any arrangement will meet current PSC guidelines. Any customers that do not respond or do not meet payment arrangements, will have service suspended.

- Broken out by customer class, how many customer accounts may be subject to termination if the Commission’s Emergency Order prohibiting terminations is rescinded and how does this number compare to the same time period in 2019?
 - Provide these figures for all utility confirmed low-income customers, including Lifeline and Customer Assistance Program (CAP) customers.
 - **Past Due Notices**
 - Business – 0
 - Residential – 10
 - Lifeline Customers – 0
 - CAP – N/A
 - The 2019 number for the same time period is 11, and the number of active accounts is similar for 2020.
 - Provide future projections if available. We will return to normal operating procedures, per PSC guidelines in regards to suspensions.
- Is the utility currently assessing a “reconnection fee” to restore service? If yes, how is the fee billed and/or collected? Will this fee apply to customers reconnected under the Commission’s Emergency Order that wish to pay any arrearage and stay connected?

We did not suspend any customers service during the order, so this is not applicable.

Universal Service Programs:

- Is the utility currently removing customers from CAP for non-payment or failure to recertify?

N/A
- What are the utility’s current Hardship Fund payment requirements to qualify low-income customers for grants (e.g., waiving payment history “good faith payment”, or CAP participation criteria) and have these requirements been revised due to the pandemic?

N/A

Other Assistance Initiatives:

- Describe any policies/procedures the utility has updated to assist customers impacted by the pandemic that go beyond provisions in PUC policies or regulations. **We have listed all customer updates on our web page / facebook page and have put information on our bill statements for the last 2 billing cycles. HTC continues to work with any customer that is experiencing hardships during these trying times.**
- Describe any proposed or anticipated changes in programs/practices/policies to assist customers impacted by the pandemic after the Governor’s Emergency Proclamation and the PUC Emergency Order on Terminations expire or are lifted.

Utilities are directed to report this information to Sarah Dewey, sdewey@pa.gov in the Commission’s Bureau of Consumer Services (BCS), detailing the efforts already in place and thereafter when further changes by the utilities are implemented. **HTC will and has always worked with its customers to remedy any past due balances. This will not change in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.**

II. Consumer Education and Outreach

The Commission is specifically interested in how utilities are informing customers of their rights and responsibilities as ratepayers during the COVID-19 pandemic and in determining whether any gaps exist in consumer education and outreach efforts. The Commission directs all jurisdictional electric, natural gas, water, wastewater, and telecommunications utilities to submit to Tom Charles, thcharles@pa.gov, in the Commission’s Office of Communications, the following information, if applicable, regarding consumer education and outreach strategies related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing recovery period.


- Descriptions and/or examples of how the utilities are educating their customers about their rights and responsibilities, assistance programs, energy efficiency and conservation, and/or COVID-19 recovery. **We have posted the FCC Keep America Connected details on our website and have made all customers aware of our policies during these trying times. If they have questions, or customer service reps answer them the best they can.**
- Efforts to reach all utility consumers with information about income-qualified programs and resources and about non-income-qualified educational services, tools, and resources. **Customers all always notified of any lifeline program changes and our customer service reps assist the customers with any questions they might have.**
- Methods that utilities are using to make their customers aware of important proceedings that may include telephonic public input hearings and allowing consumers to be able to make their voices heard. **N/A**
- Description of utility outreach methods that could be used to inform eligible Pennsylvanians about changes related to COVID-19 in the Lifeline Program for Telephone and Broadband Internet Service. **Customers are notified to any changes to the Lifeline program by direct mail , Monthly newsletter, and bill stuffers. We did not send any special information out pertaining to any lifeline changes during the Covid-19 pandemic.**

If programs have been modified due to the pandemic, please provide current customer education tools and advertising so that the Commission's own customer education efforts are based on current utility programs and practices. **None were made during the pandemic**

This Secretarial Letter shall be served upon all electric, natural gas, water, wastewater, and telecommunications utilities under the Commission's jurisdiction. All jurisdictional electric, natural gas, water, wastewater, and telecommunications utilities are directed to provide the requested information within 10 calendar days of the issuance of this Secretarial Letter. All responses to the Secretarial Letter should be directed to the Secretary and made by e-filing through the Commission's e-filing system noting the docket number. If your response contains confidential or proprietary information, you may email your filing directly to Secretary Chiavetta at rchiavetta@pa.gov. As directed, responses pertaining to certain data requests should also be sent to Sarah Dewey of the Bureau of Consumer Services and Tom Charles, Director of Communications, respectively.

If you have any questions in this matter, please contact Renardo L. Hicks, Chief Counsel, at rehicks@pa.gov, or John Herzog, Executive Deputy Chief Counsel, at jherzog@pa.gov.

Sincerely


Rosemary Chiavetta
Secretary

cc: Seth Mendelsohn, PUC Executive Director
Renardo L. Hicks, Chief Counsel
John Herzog, Executive Deputy Chief Counsel
Alexis Bechtel, Director, Bureau of Consumer Services
Tom Charles, Director, Office of Communications
Lori Mohr, Bureau of Consumer Services
Louise Fink Smith, Law Bureau
Office of Consumer Advocate
Office of Small Business Advocate
Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement