

BEFORE THE
PENNSYLVANIA PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION

Review of Universal Service and

Energy Conservation Programs

:

Docket No. M-2017-2596907

REPLY COMMENTS OF THE
UNITED WAY OF PENNSYLVANIA

I. INTRODUCTION

The United Way of Pennsylvania and PA 2-1-1 (the “United Way” and “PA 2-1-1”) submitted initial comments to the Commission as it gathered feedback from stakeholders about the Universal Service and Energy Conservation programs. United Way also participated in public stakeholder meetings hosted by the Commission on September 13 and 14. The United Way’s reply comments will focus on clarifying our request in our initial comments based on questions and feedback from other stakeholders, as well as demonstrate why PA 2-1-1 would be a good partner for utilities who are stewards of rate payer dollars to support Universal Service programs.

II. CLARIFICATION OF REQUEST IN INITIAL COMMENTS

To begin, United Way of Pennsylvania would like to clarify our request to the PUC made in the Conclusion section (page 10) of our initial submission. Revised wording follows:

“United Way and PA 2-1-1 respectfully request that utilities be permitted to invest a portion of their universal service dollars to 2-1-1 services. Specifically, we suggest that **up to** 5% of a utility’s universal service dollars **may** be directed for use by 2-1-1 to support the work they do with utility customers **if the utility determines that such a partnership will allow them to assist financially struggling utility customers more effectively and efficiently.**”

III. CHARITABLE GIVING BY UTILITIES

Utility providers across Pennsylvania have long been amongst the most stalwart supporters of United Way, and of the financially struggling families in our community. The Commission should be aware that this is a separate, charitable endeavor by these utilities at the corporate level, and by facilitating employee campaigns for United Way donations. These investments are leveraged by local United Ways to support financially struggling families, above and beyond what is required by law for Universal Services and energy conservation. This request by United Way of the Public Utility Commission seeks to additionally establish a business relationship which we believe will create economic efficiencies for utility providers in their Universal Services programs, specifically as they seek to provide more effective service to those struggling to make ends meet and to pay their utility bills.

IV. OPPORTUNITY FOR ALIGNMENT OF UNIVERSAL SERVICES WITH PA 2-1-1

A recent study by the Heinz College at Carnegie Mellon University highlighted some of the reasons why more than 15,000 people elected to call 2-1-1 last year, rather than their utility provider when they were in need of help. These reasons ranged from fear of having their service terminated if they couldn't meet program guidelines, to not understanding the policies and procedures for enrollment, to simply not wanting to share details of their hardship (loss of a spouse or a child) that could actually lead to them getting assistance, with a utility customer service representative.

United Ways are leading supporters of human services in every community that we serve. It is core to our mission to understand and promote excellence in the human service field and to connect those in need with necessary services. A strengthened partnership between PA 2-1-1, utility providers and the PUC has the potential to:

- Increase the number of low-income individuals who know about utility assistance and alternative resources;
- Increase utility customers' use of alternative resources (such as income assistance, housing, and food stamps), so that they can begin reducing their utility debts and meet the terms of their current payment agreements;
- Increase the number of pre-screened referrals to utilities' customer service centers and ensure that the people are prepared with the information they need to effectively connect with the utility provider;
- Screen people contacting 2-1-1 to assess their eligibility for Universal Service Programs; and
- Provide outbound text services to raise awareness of and engagement with services.

Moving forward, 2-1-1 can also help utility companies by:

- Reducing barriers to enrollment through a one-stop-shop approach.
- Reducing the “drop off” of people enrolled in utility assistance programs through warm transfers to utility services and additional community resources
- Helping utility companies provide their customers with a place to turn for help with needs the utility company is not positioned or missioned to address.

V. CONCLUSION

United Way’s initial comments provided additional data which demonstrates the work that PA 2-1-1 is already doing to help Pennsylvanians access utility assistance, as well as meet their other basic needs. We believe our trained operators can help link customers who are having trouble paying their utility bills. A Universal Services program investment toward maintaining 2-1-1’s comprehensive database of health and human service organizations in PA will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of connecting customers to services which address other basic needs. We hope to have the opportunity to review the PA 2-1-1 service with each utility, and explore PA 2-1-1’s value proposition for each utility’s universal services program. We also encourage the Public Utility Commission to consider a closer partnership with 2-1-1 among the approved strategies that utilities can put forward in their Universal Services plans.

Respectfully Submitted,

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