



Agenda Date: 2/23/22
Agenda Item: 7B

STATE OF NEW JERSEY
Board of Public Utilities
44 South Clinton Avenue, 1st Floor
Post Office Box 350
Trenton, New Jersey 08625-0350
www.nj.gov/bpu/

CUSTOMER ASSISTANCE/
OFFICE OF CABLE TV AND
TELECOMMUNICATIONS

IN THE MATTER OF THE NOTICE BY UNITED)
TELEPHONE COMPANY OF NEW JERSEY, INC. D/B/A)
CENTURYLINK OF CHANGES IN THE CLINTON, NEW)
JERSEY BUSINESS OFFICE FUNCTIONS PURSUANT)
TO N.J.A.C. 14:3-5.1(c)) DOCKET NO. TO20070476

Parties of Record:

Colleen A. Foley, Esq., for Petitioner, United Telephone Company d/b/a Century Link
Brian Lipman, Esq., Director, New Jersey Division of Rate Counsel

BY THE BOARD:

This Order addresses the request of United Telephone Company d/b/a CenturyLink ("Petitioner" or "CenturyLink"), for a waiver of the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities ("Board's") rules at N.J.A.C. 14:3-5.1(c) to transition its Clinton regional business office to a virtual customer service platform and to change the manner in which it accepts payments.

BACKGROUND

By letter dated July 3, 2020, Petitioner notified the Board that in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it had ceased to operate its Clinton, New Jersey regional customer assistance office and was seeking to change the manner in which it accepts payments.

Petitioner is a telecommunications company that provides voice access lines to rural customers in northwestern New Jersey. N.J.A.C. 14:3-5.1(a) and (b) requires a utility to maintain an "in-person" office in its New Jersey service area where customers may initiate and terminate service, file complaints, submit service inquiries and make bill payments. The office may provide various other functions as determined by the utility. CenturyLink maintained a single customer service office in Clinton, New Jersey, at 160 Center Street ("Clinton Office"), operating from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, until March 20, 2020, when the Clinton Office was temporarily closed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. In its letter the Company indicated one (1) employee worked at the office, which averaged three (3) customers per day, prior to the temporary closure. The customer service representative was assigned to work remotely until September 1, 2020,

when Petitioner advised that the customer service representative was no longer assigned to the Clinton Office and that Petitioner had no plans to replace the employee.

Due to the expected changes in customer interaction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Petitioner transitioned the Clinton Office to a “virtual customer service platform”, consisting of a “dedicated customer service kiosk” with a telephone that customers visiting the Clinton Office can use to speak directly with CenturyLink customer service and repair representatives during normal business hours to make credit card bill payments, make billing inquiries, initiate and terminate service, lodge complaints and make service inquiries.

In addition to the transition to a virtual customer service platform, CenturyLink intends to stop taking certain types of bill payments (by cash or check) at the Clinton Office and will instead direct customers who wish to pay their bills using cash or a check to a nearby third party retail facility. Currently the closest third-party retail facilities to the Clinton Office are contained in the Walgreen’s located at 37 Old Route 22, Clinton, New Jersey 08809, approximately 0.7 miles from the Clinton Office; and the Wal-Mart Store at Route 513 and I-78, Clinton, New Jersey 08809, which is approximately 2.0 miles from the Clinton Office. Petitioner maintains both locations are accessible by public transportation and maintain longer business hours than the Clinton Office.

On November 19, 2020, the New Jersey Division of Rate Counsel (“Rate Counsel”) submitted a letter to the Board advising that it did not oppose the Petitioner’s proposal to transition to a virtual model. Rate Counsel noted that the lack of an in person customer assistance office would present obstacles for technologically challenged individuals, it would be more difficult for individuals to return or repair equipment, and that the lack of in person payment opportunities would result in the imposition of “service fees” charged by the third party providers entrusted to collect the bill payments, e.g., Walmart and Walgreens. Rate Counsel advised that the issues identified as potential problems for customers justified the opportunity for public notice and comment. Rate Counsel further recommended that the Board monitor the transition to the virtual platform by requiring quarterly reports of the performance of the virtual platform and customer complaints in relation to the services provided therein.

Although Petitioner indicated it did not receive any complaints on the office function changes, the Board did receive a complaint that customers were concerned about the replacement of a live customer service person at the Clinton Office with a telephone on a stand, and the resulting inability to speak to a customer service representative in person. In addition, customers reported that the payment kiosks at the third party locations were not working and the store representatives were unable to provide assistance.

STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of Petitioner’s request, Rate Counsel’s comments and discussions with Petitioner, Staff recommends the following:

1. In lieu of maintaining a fully functioning “in-person” customer service office, as required by the rules, Petitioner will allow payments to be made without a fee to the customer, at any Western Union payment kiosk located within the State of New Jersey. Signage must be placed at the Clinton Office to indicate that payments may be made at any Western Union authorized payment center in the State of New Jersey. Payment would be deemed paid by the due date if made at a Western Union authorized payment center by the date due.

2. Petitioner will provide customers, who wish to return service equipment, with a pre-paid mailer box to facilitate the return of such equipment.
3. Petitioner will be required to provide a quarterly report to the Division of Customer Assistance with data on monthly Western Union payments.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Board has reviewed Petitioner's request, Rate Counsel's comments and Staff's recommendations. The Board **FINDS** that Staff's recommendation of approval subject to the conditions set forth herein is appropriate.

For good cause shown based upon the unique facts detailed herein, pursuant to N.J.A.C. 14:1-1.2, the Board **HEREBY WAIVES** strict compliance with the requirements of N.J.A.C. 14:3-5.1(a) and (b) providing for an in-person office within CenturyLink's service territory. The Board instead **DIRECTS** Petitioner to comply with all of the conditions outlined by Board Staff in this Order with regard to acceptance of payment and customer service, including the requirement for quarterly reports.

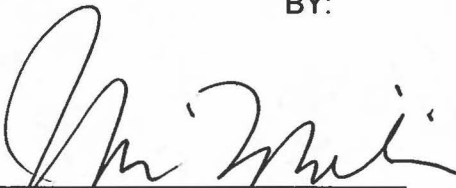
The Board **HEREBY FINDS** that the waiver granted herein is limited to Petitioner, given Petitioner's unique circumstances and the limited number of customers served by Petitioner and by the Clinton Office.

The Board **FURTHER NOTES** that this waiver in no way eliminates or modifies the requirements of N.J.A.C. 14:3-5.1(f) and (g).

The effective date of this Order is March 2, 2022.

DATED: February 23, 2022

BOARD OF PUBLIC UTILITIES
BY:



JOSEPH L. FIORDALISO
PRESIDENT



MARY-ANNA HOLDEN
COMMISSIONER



DIANNE SOLOMON
COMMISSIONER




UPENDRA J. CHIVUKULA
COMMISSIONER



ROBERT M. GORDON
COMMISSIONER

ATTEST:



AIDA CAMACHO-WELCH
SECRETARY

IN THE MATTER OF THE NOTICE BY UNITED TELEPHONE COMPANY OF NEW JERSEY, INC.
D/B/A CENTURYLINK OF CHANGES IN THE CLINTON, NEW JERSEY BUSINESS OFFICE
FUNCTIONS PURSUANT TO N.J.A.C. 14:3-5.1(c)

DOCKET NO. TO20070476

SERVICE LIST

<p><u>Division of Rate Counsel</u> 140 East Front Street, 4th Floor Post Office Box 003 Trenton, NJ 08625-0003</p> <p>Brian Lipman, Director blipman@rpa.nj.gov</p> <p>Maria Novas-Ruiz, Esq. mnovas-ruiz@rpa.nj.gov</p> <p><u>United Telephone Company d/b/a Century Link</u> Pamela Sherwood, Esq. Assistant General Counsel CenturyLink 4625 W 86th Street Indianapolis, IN 46268 pamela.sherwood@centurylink.com</p> <p>Josh Motzer Director, State Gov't Relations CenturyLink 37 W. Board St., Suite 470 Columbus, OH 43215 Josh.motzer@centurylink.com</p> <p>Colleen Foley, Esq. Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr LLP One Riverfront Plaza, Suite 1520 1037 Raymond Blvd. Newark, NJ 07102 colleen.foley@saul.com</p> <p><u>Division of Law</u> R.J. Hughes Justice Complex 25 Market Street, Post Office Box 112 Trenton, N.J. 08625</p> <p>Pamela Owen, Assistant Section Chief pamela.owen@law.njoag.gov</p> <p>Meliha Arnautovic meliha.arnautovic@law.njoag.gov</p> <p>Terel Klein terel.klein@law.njoag.gov</p>	<p><u>Board of Public Utilities</u> 44 South Clinton Avenue, 1st Floor Post Office Box 350 Trenton, NJ 08625-0350</p> <p>Aida Camacho-Welch, Secretary board.secretary@bpu.nj.gov</p> <p><u>Office of Case Management</u></p> <p>Karriemah Graham karriemah.graham@bpu.nj.gov</p> <p><u>General Counsel's Office</u></p> <p>Abe Silverman, General Counsel abe.Silverman@bpu.nj.gov</p> <p>Carol Artale, Deputy General Counsel carol.artale@bpu.nj.gov</p> <p>Suzanne Patnaude suzanne.patnaude@bpu.nj.gov</p> <p><u>Executive Director's Office</u></p> <p>Bob Brabston, Executive Director robert.brabston@bpu.nj.gov</p> <p><u>Division of Customer Assistance</u></p> <p>Julie Ford Williams, Director julie.ford@bpu.nj.gov</p> <p>Richard Lambert richard.lambert@bpu.nj.gov</p> <p><u>Office of Cable Television and Telecommunications</u></p> <p>Lawanda Gilbert, Director lawanda.gilbert@bpu.nj.gov</p> <p>Harold Bond harold.bond@bpu.nj.gov</p>
--	--