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Department of Commerce Division of Public Utilities

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Action Request Response

To: Public Service Commission of Utah

From: Utah Division of Public Utilities

Chris Parker, Director

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Date: April 23, 2020

Re: **Docket No. 20-999-03**, Disconnection Policy Investigation

Recommendation (No Action Required)

The Utah Division of Public Utilities (“Division”) recommends no action is required from the Utah Public Service Commission (“Commission”) for temporary changes that the telecommunication utility services (“Telecoms”) have made with regards to disconnection policies.

Issue

The Commission issued an Action Request to the Division on March 27, 2020 to investigate the disconnection policies of the utilities over which the Commission has jurisdiction to regulate these policies, including whether these policies have or have not been modified during the coronavirus outbreak. The Commission requests that the investigation include whether late fees have been waived, reconnections (whether previously disconnected customers were reconnected

or not), and the scope and duration of the suspensions, if any. This response is specific to Telecoms.

Background

The world is responding to a pandemic of a respiratory disease spreading from person-to-person caused by a novel coronavirus. The disease has been named “coronavirus disease 2019” (abbreviated “COVID-19”). It poses a serious health risk to anyone who contracts it. “The World Health Organization (“WHO”) first declared COVID-19 a world health emergency in January 2020. Since the virus was first diagnosed in Wuhan, China, it has been detected in over 190 countries and all U.S. states. In early March, the focal point of infections shifted from China to Europe, especially Italy, but by April 2020, the focus shifted to the United States, where the number of infections was accelerating. The infection has sickened over 1.5 million people, with thousands of fatalities. More than 80 countries have closed their borders to arrivals from countries with infections, ordered businesses to close, instructed their populations to self-quarantine, and closed schools to an estimated 1.5 billion children. In late January 2020, China was the first country to impose travel restrictions, followed by South Korea and Vietnam. Over the four-week period from mid-March to early April 2020, more than 17 million Americans filed for unemployment insurance, raising the prospect of a deep economic recession and a significant increase in the unemployment rate.”¹

Due to these extreme circumstances, many people cannot pay their bills and the Commission wants to know how the utilities are responding and what policies have been put in place.

Discussion

The following is a list of Telecoms contacted:

- Comcast
- First Digital
- Electric Lightwave
- MCI
- Veracity

¹ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R46270.pdf>

- Granite Communications
- Carbon
- AT&T
- CenturyLink
- Strata
- Frontier
- All West
- South Central Utah
- XO Communication

Most of the Telecoms have joined the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Keep Americans Connected Pledge.² The pledge includes the following:

Given the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on American society, [[Company Name]] pledges for the next 60 days to:

1. not terminate service to any residential or small business customers because of their inability to pay their bills due to the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic;
2. waive any late fees that any residential or small business customers incur because of their economic circumstances related to the coronavirus pandemic; and
3. open its Wi-Fi hotspots to any American who needs them.

Of those who have not joined the Keep Americans Connected Pledge, their responses have followed similar practices of waiving fees and not disconnecting customers during the duration of the pandemic. Some prior disconnected customers have been reconnected if they have kids in school that require the internet. Many Companies have also stated that after 60 days, they will determine if they need to extend the modified policies.

² <https://www.fcc.gov/keep-americans-connected>

Conclusion

The Division concludes that policies have been modified during this pandemic but recommends that the Commission take no action at this time.