

Consultation on Disconnection and Reconnection Practices Phase One Meeting Summary

Meeting date June 13, 2016 **Time** 1:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Location Video conference AUC offices **Facilitator** AUC staff
 Tenth floor, 10055 - 106 Street,
 Edmonton
 Fourth floor, 425 First Street S.W.,
 Calgary

Teleconference
 Phone: 1-866-792-1318
 Conference code: 8665992

1 Introductions

Name	Company
Peter Hickmann	Alberta Human Services
Charlene Warren	AltaGas Utilities
Kimberly Hopp	AltaGas Utilities
Amy Kingshott	ATCO Electric
Theresa Martin	ATCO Electric
Jessica Laird	ATCO Energy
Stacey Zinyk	ATCO Energy
Jennifer Bell	ATCO Gas
Rob Yeatheard	ATCO Gas
Amanda Brinker	AUC
Andrea Laroia	AUC
Colleen Gedes	AUC
Maria Baitoiu	AUC
Rose Ferrer	AUC
Bettyann Skagen	Battle River Power Coop
Karen Cooke	Direct Energy
Darren Foster	EPCOR
Naomi Broni	EPCOR Energy
Naina Jairath	UCA
Mary Thomas	UCA
Joanne Mulders	Utility Network

2 Feedback from the 2015-2016 winter moratorium cycle

- Overall, feedback received from the group regarding last year’s winter moratorium cycle was positive. In general, all parties noted that there was good communication between utility companies, the UCA and Alberta Human Services when dealing with vulnerable customer related matters.

UCA staff update:

- For the 2015-2016 winter moratorium cycle, electric and natural gas retailers provided the UCA with a list of 1,966 customer names who had been disconnected prior to the onset of winter weather. The UCA was successful in reconnecting 67 customers to their natural gas and/or electricity services. UCA staff noted that in comparison to last year, there was a decline in the number of customers that they were able to reconnect (129 reconnections in 2015).
- Of the 67 customers that the UCA was successful in reconnecting, 47 were able to negotiate payment arrangements with their service providers, six were able to resolve their billing disputes through the UCA's mediation efforts and 14 received third-party payment to get reconnected.
- 137 customers were reconnected prior to the UCA contacting them. In total, there were 227 repeat customers for the year. Similar to last year, the UCA continued to track reasons why a customer may be a repeat or first time on the project. Based on information that was voluntarily provided by customers to UCA staff, repeat customers fell into one of the following four categories: Fixed Income, AISH, Senior or Pension, Other (life event, vulnerable, etc.). The main reasons why an individual was on the project for the first time included the following: Life Event, Prices are Too High, Vulnerable/Receiving Financial Assistance, New to Alberta.
 - UCA staff asked the group whether retailers had any recommendations for how to decrease the amount of repeat customers going forward.
 - One retailer advised that when it is contacted by a vulnerable customer, in some instances it may work with the United Way and refer the customer to 2-1-1 so that the customer is made aware of the types of funding options that may be available to them.
 - If parties were aware of any other agencies or funding options, which could help to decrease the amount of repeat vulnerable customers, it was asked that the UCA be informed of these agencies so that the UCA could provide customers with alternate resources. UCA staff intends on adding a list of these agencies to its website.
 - UCA staff asked retailers whether it would be helpful if the UCA forwarded them a list of vulnerable customers that were repeats (for information purposes). Since retailers advised that this list would be useful, UCA staff advised that it would circulate this list to retailers.

ACTION: UCA staff to forward to retailers (for information purposes) a list of vulnerable customers that are repeat customers.

- Discussion regarding whether there were any process improvements that could be made to help decrease the amount of repeat customers will continue at the next scheduled working group meeting.
- During the September 22, 2015, Consultation on Disconnection and Reconnection Practices – Phase One meeting, UCA staff put forward an action for the UCA to continue to contact customers owing \$50 or less and obtain reasons why customers remain disconnected despite owing a small amount, with UCA staff to provide the group numbers and reasons in the spring of 2016.

- UCA staff advised that there were 76 sites which owed \$50 or less. Of the 76 sites, the UCA could only get a hold of 18 site owners. Of the 18 sites, six had already been reconnected prior to the UCA contacting them, six were rental or vacant properties which did not require reconnection, two were commercial accounts (as discussed during previous stakeholder meetings, commercial accounts are not considered to be vulnerable consumers), one customer had moved and had not paid their bill, one customer had paid its bill but could not afford to pay for the required gas permit to be reconnected, and one customer received assistance from a third-party agency.
- AUC staff asked for feedback regarding the existing process. Retailers advised that although \$50 or less is a small amount, it is still an amount owed by a customer. Generally, retailers will try and work with these customers to setup a payment plan or have a third-party agency provide assistance; however, it is up to the customer to reach out if they are having problems paying the amount in arrears.
- The group discussed whether there were any process changes that should be made for the upcoming winter moratorium cycle for how to deal with customers that owe \$50 or less. Since the group did not immediately determine whether any process changes for the upcoming cycle were necessary, it was suggested that UCA staff continue for the upcoming cycle to contact customers owing less than \$50 or less and obtain reasons, where possible, why customers remain disconnected despite owing such a small amount. UCA staff will provide the group with its findings in the spring.

ACTION: UCA staff to continue contacting customers owing less than \$50 or less for the upcoming cycle and obtain reasons why customers remain disconnected despite owing such a small amount. UCA staff to provide the group with its findings in the spring.

- The UCA experienced a high volume of mail return and noted that 481 letters were marked as undeliverable and were returned from Canada Post back to the UCA. During the 2014-2015 year, the UCA only received 143 undeliverable letters back. As such, UCA staff stressed the importance of having parties provide accurate mailing addresses and information.
- In the 2014-15 winter season, the UCA came across a number of instances where the customer phone number was not provided or was invalid (e.g. 111-111-1111). UCA staff confirmed that they were no longer experiencing this issue.
- Closer to the start of the upcoming winter moratorium cycle, UCA staff advised that it would forward to regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca the Excel spreadsheet to be used by retailers when forwarding customer information to UCA staff. AUC staff will then circulate the Excel spreadsheet to all retailers involved with the vulnerable customers initiative. To better ensure that the UCA receives the necessary information, it was also requested that UCA staff populate the spreadsheet with a few examples so that it is clear for parties what information is required and what format the information should be provided in.

ACTION: Closer to the start of the upcoming winter moratorium cycle, UCA staff to forward to regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca the Excel spreadsheet (with examples of the type of information that should be provided) to be used by retailers when forwarding customer information to UCA staff. AUC staff will circulate this Excel spreadsheet to all retailers involved with the vulnerable customers initiative.

3 UCA process – group to discuss timelines and other changes to process for 2016/2017

- Parties agreed that details regarding timelines and processes for the 2016/2017 winter moratorium cycle be discussed at the next scheduled working group meeting in the fall.

4 Referral process – social service agencies to provide updated contact and process information

- Due to a number of changes occurring within numerous organizations, parties agreed that the contact list to be used for the upcoming winter moratorium cycle be updated at the next scheduled working group meeting in the fall, and circulated to parties shortly after.

5 Alternative assistance programs

- During the September 22, 2015, Consultation on Disconnection and Reconnection Practices – Phase One meeting, an action was put forward for UCA staff to try and identify assistance programs that may be available for customers seeking financial assistance in order to be reconnected, but did not qualify for third party assistance from Alberta Works or AISH.
 - UCA staff advised that it knew of five cases (and expressed that there could be numerous unreported cases) where a customer seeking financial assistance to be reconnected, did not qualify for third-party assistance from Alberta Works or AISH because they lived on reserve land.
 - UCA staff noted that they had not yet been able to look into whether there were any other assistance programs available for these customers.
 - Service Alberta staff indicated that they will often refer customers to 2-1-1 (which is run through the distress centre), as the distress centre is generally aware of the various types of funding options available.

6 Next steps

- AUC staff thanked all parties for their participation and continued hard work on this initiative. AUC staff advised that the next working group meeting will be scheduled for fall 2016.