

## AUC Winter Utilities Reconnection Program Meeting Summary

**Meeting date** May 17, 2017 **Time** 9:30 a.m. to 12 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
Melanie Aloisio	AB Human Services
Robin Butterworth	AB Human Services
Roxanne Gill	AB Works Income Support
Linda Kinnee	Alta Gas Utilities Inc.
Lee Anne Tracey	Alta Gas Utilities Inc.
Kimberly Hopp	Alta Gas Ltd.
Amy Kingshott	ATCO Electric
Daryl Pattison	ATCO Electric
Rob Yeatheard	ATCO Gas
Carol Benoit	ATCO Gas
Theresa Martin	ATCO Energy
Colleen Caharel	ATCO Energy
Summer Abney	AUC
Krystal Clark	AUC
Andrea Laroiya	AUC
Amanda Brinker	AUC
Colleen Geddes	AUC
Raymond Lee	AUC
Rose Ferrer	AUC
Tracey Ruschin	City of Lethbridge
Bryce Kelly	City of Lethbridge
Lori Harnack	Cognera

Karen Cooke	Direct Energy Regulated Services
Steven Johnson	Direct Energy Regulated Services
Wayne Calder	ENMAX Energy
Thanh Nguyen	ENMAX Power
Steven Schrader	ENMAX Energy
Rob Mulligan	ENMAX Encompass
Kerry Anne Munroe	ENMAX Power
Grant Weismiller	ENMAX Power
Cathy Sanderson	EPCOR Distribution & Transmission
Naomi Broni	EPCOR Energy
Danielle Blackwell	EPCOR Energy
Joshua Daniel	EQUS
Bridget Isaac	Fortis Alberta
Jessica Punko	UCA
Tanya Johnstone	UCA
Naina Jairath	UCA
Joanne Mulders	Utility Network

**2 AUC surveys**

- AUC staff advised that they would be introducing a new practice where stakeholders would be surveyed regarding the AUC’s consultation process. A survey would be sent out to attendees after each meeting requesting their feedback on their experience of the consultation (e.g., was the consultation productive, were meaningful discussions held, etc.). The purpose of these surveys is to allow AUC staff to identify areas in which they can improve the consultation process for stakeholders.

**3 Feedback from the 2016-2017 winter moratorium cycle**

- General consensus among all parties was that the winter moratorium cycle went smoothly. Stakeholders were pleased with the level of communication that took place throughout the process.

**UCA staff update:**

- For the 2016-2017 winter moratorium cycle, electric and natural gas retailers provided the UCA with a list of 2,191 customers names who had been disconnected prior to the onset of winter weather. The UCA was successful in reconnecting 83 customers, up from 67 customers last year, to their natural gas and/or electricity services.
- UCA staff noted that the Winter Utility Reconnection Program (WURP) lead to the reconnection of 213 Albertan homes without services, as of November 1, 2016.

- Of the 83 customers that the UCA was successful in reconnecting, 53 were able to negotiate payment arrangements with their service providers with UCA assistance, ten were able to resolve existing billing disputes through the UCA's mediation efforts and 19 customers received third-party payment to get reconnected. 130 customers were reconnected by retailers who had proactively reached out to them, prior to the UCA contacting them on the customers behalf.
- In total, there were 160 repeat customers for the year. Similar to last year, the UCA continued to track reasons why a customer may be repeatedly on the program. Based on information that was voluntarily provided by customers to UCA staff, repeat customers fell into one of the following four categories: Life event, fixed income, senior or pension, and other (life event, vulnerable, etc.). The main reasons why individuals were on the program for the first time included the following: life event, prices are too high, vulnerable/receiving financial assistance, English as a second language.
- Similar to previous years, UCA staff advised that it was still aware of 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 advised that it would work with Alberta Works offline to discuss whether there were any other assistance programs available for these customers.
- UCA staff expressed that they continued to experience a high volume of mail return, and noted that 629 letters were returned as undeliverable by Canada Post. In the interest of improving the overall number of vulnerable customers with whom contact was made, UCA asked the group whether email addresses could be included on the list, as an alternative to physical mail outs. Retailers advised that they would need to look into whether there were any privacy or legality issues before making a determination on whether emails could be included as part of the process. Similarly, UCA staff asked that UCA staff identify whether there were any privacy or legality issues (e.g., anti-spam) which may prevent them from collecting customer email addresses as part of the WURP.

**ACTION:**

**Retailers to identify whether there are any privacy or legality issues which may prevent them from sharing customer email addresses with the UCA as part of the winter utilities reconnection program. Retailers to provide this information to [regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca](mailto:regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca) by June 9, 2017.**

**UCA staff to identify whether there are any privacy or legality issues (e.g., anti-spam) which may prevent them from collecting customer email addresses as part of the winter utilities reconnection program. UCA staff to provide this information to [regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca](mailto:regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca) by June 9, 2017**

- UCA staff had questioned whether there was benefit in still including on the disconnected customers list, those customers who remained disconnected for more than 12 months. Based on group discussion, parties pointed out that there have been cases where vulnerable customers were disconnected for more than a year before being discovered. Therefore, all parties agreed to keep those customers who remained disconnected for more than 12 months on the list.

- It came to light that many customers do not inform their retailers when they move. UCA staff was asked if they had information on their website regarding the 'move-out' process involving a landlord and tenant. UCA staff advised that they were working on developing a page on their website which would include detailed instructions for consumers who are in the process of changing addresses. UCA staff noted that they would keep the AUC informed on this.

#### 4 Referral process

- To ensure that the contact list to be used for the upcoming winter moratorium cycle was still relevant, AUC staff advised that it would circulate a copy of the list to parties to review. Any changes in contact information should be sent to: [regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca](mailto:regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca) by June 9, 2017. AUC staff will then circulate an updated copy to stakeholders.

**ACTION:**

**Stakeholders to review and provide any changes to last year's winter utilities reconnection contact list to [regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca](mailto:regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca) by June 9, 2017.**

#### 5 UCA Update – Customers owing less than \$50 and remaining disconnected

- During the June 13, 2016 WURP meeting, UCA staff committed to continuing to contact customers owing \$50 or less, to obtain reasons for customers remaining disconnected despite owing a small amount. UCA staff was to provide the stakeholders with numbers and reasons at the spring meeting in 2017.
  - UCA staff advised that there were 20 accounts with a balance of \$25 to \$50 and 41 accounts with a balance of \$25 or less, however UCA staff were unable to obtain information from customers as to why these customers remained disconnected.
- The group discussed whether distributors would be able to adopt the practice of performing site visits for those disconnected sites identified as customers owing \$50 or less. Distributors advised that they would look into this and email [regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca](mailto:regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca) by June 9, 2017, on whether this practice could be adopted.

**ACTION:**

**Distributors to email [regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca](mailto:regulatorypolicy@auc.ab.ca) by June 9, 2017, regarding the possibility of adopting the practice of performing site visits for those disconnected sites that are identified as customers owing \$50 or less.**

#### 6 Follow up conversation from the load limiting device / program consultation meeting

- In follow up to some of the discussions regarding load limiting which were held in Red Deer on February 8, 2017, AUC staff asked retailers to discuss their processes around CONP, including how they work with their vulnerable customers.

- **Direct Energy:**

Direct Energy had two different processes. During the winter moratorium time frame, it would work with the vulnerable customer to setup a payment arrangement to try and get them reconnected. During the spring, Direct Energy would be looking for a customer to make a payment that was closer to the full amount owed. If Direct Energy was unable to help its customers, it would refer its customer to contact Alberta Support (this information would also be included in Direct Energy's letters to customers). Direct Energy noted that it remained flexible in trying to help its customers.

- **UtilityNet:**

UtilityNet noted that it would work with its customers to make payment arrangements. If it was unable to make a payment arrangement with its customer, it would drop the customer back to the RRO, and if the customer wanted to be re-enrolled, it would do so after a payment arrangement had been made.

- **ENMAX:**

For those customers on the regulated rate, ENMAX would be proactive by making phone calls and sending notices to these customers. Once a disconnection had occurred, it would work with the customer to clear the arrears on their account and then issue a reconnection. ENMAX has seen good success rates with this practice and quick reconnection times. For those customers on a competitive contract, customers may be cut off for non-payment, disconnected and sent back to their default supplier.

- **EPCOR:**

EPCOR noted that it works with its customers prior to disconnection. During the winter moratorium period, if a site has a load limiter, the customer at that site would need to make a payment arrangement with EPCOR in order for full power to be restored at that site. EPCOR ensures that its customers are made aware of the processes associated with having a load limiter. If EPCOR was unable to assist its vulnerable customers, it would refer them to the UCA or Alberta Works.

- **AltaGas Utilities:**

As a default supplier, AltaGas Utilities refers its vulnerable customers to 2-1-1 (which is run through the distress centre), Alberta Works or the UCA.

- The group discussed that the UCA and Alberta Supports are good first points of contact when trying to refer customers to assistance programs.
- AUC staff working within the consumer relations division were curious as to what retailers' collection processes were and whether they charged a deposit to re-connect a customer remaining in arrears:

- **EPCOR:**

- EPCOR sent AUC staff an email clarifying its processes after the meeting was held. According to EPCOR staff, at the time of enrollment for service, it may charge a \$300 deposit for power and \$150 for water (the deposit amount is dependent on the customer's credit score). The deposit could also be waived if the customer applies for APW, and EPCOR also allows payment arrangements on deposits.
- Once a customer is disconnected for non-payment, the expectation is payment of all arrears to restore service. However, depending on the situation, it may turn on power if there is a minimal balance left on the account. With all customer accounts, EPCOR follows its Terms and Conditions to treat its customers the same. Depending on the customer and their account details, it will proceed with the best option that aligns to its terms.
- EPCOR encourages its customers who indicate they are having financial challenges to contact support options that may be available. Where possible, EPCOR extends payment arrangements and if it recognizes a vulnerable customer situation, it will reach out to the UCA, Alberta Support, etc. for their assistance.

- **ENMAX:**

As noted by ENMAX, its deposit amounts are tiered based on an average invoice (\$50 for an apartment to approximately \$200 for a residential household). Customers would need to resolve its arrears and would hold the deposit until the customer had displayed 12 months of satisfactory payment history.

- **Direct Energy:**

Direct Energy advised that on the regulated side, it would request a \$200 deposit and ask the customer to pay the full amount in arrears on the next bill before a re-connection occurred. A customer on a competitive contract would be dropped back to the RRO.

## **7 ENMAX presentation**

- The Minister of Energy recently asked the MSA to carry out an RRO inquiry.
- Enmax mentioned their intention to propose 4 alternative possibilities for dealing with vulnerable customers. Enmax indicated that when the RRO regulation is being changed there may be an opportunity to address vulnerable customers. Enmax was due to give the same presentation to the MSA on the Friday following this meeting.

## **8 Process evaluation**

- ATCO Gas staff raised an improvement to the existing WURP process for retailers to consider.

- On the gas side, ATCO Gas stated that it often sees customers getting shut off in April, switching retailers in May and wanting same day reconnects. It asked that retailers consider setting some expectations regarding fees for customers to get reconnected.
- ATCO Gas also reminded competitive retailers about the importance of selecting the correct reason code when dropping a site. The default supplier is required to pick up that site and use that customer information; therefore picking the incorrect drop reason code could have big impacts on the default supplier.

## **9 Other issues and 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 2017.