

PSC Consumer Services Unit

*Celebrating
40 years of service*

By Gay Fred and Contessa King

Do you have a question about your utility service or a service-related issue that you have not been able to resolve with your utility company? If so, there is a good chance that the Consumer Services Unit (CSU) of the Missouri Public Service Commission can help.

“Often the first time a consumer contacts the Missouri Public Service Commission, he/she talks with a representative from our Consumer Services Unit,” said Chairman Daniel Hall.

“Consumer Services personnel are on the front line working with consumers and utility company representatives to ensure that service is being provided under Commission rules and regulations. We are very proud of the work that CSU does to help consumers across the state. Often through their intervention, consumers save money.”

CSU is responsible for receiving, investigating and responding to questions, informal and formal complaints, and public comments received from consumers of regulated natural gas, electric, telephone, water and sewer utilities.

“Our main focus is to ensure compliance with Commission rules and regulations as well as Commission approved tariffs filed by investor-owned utilities,” said Courtney Dunham, CSU Coordinator. “We are neutral in our review in order to balance both the interest of the consumer and the utility.”

In 2016, the Consumer Services Unit of the Public Service Commission proudly recognizes its 40th year of helping consumers across Missouri. CSU was formed in 1976 with the purpose of having dedicated resources to receive, investigate and respond to informal and formal consumer complaints, inquiries and public comments received by the Commission.

Prior to 1976, complaints about utility companies were handled by the Engineering Department. Most of those were received by mail. Today, the majority of all contacts with the CSU are handled by telephone, through the PSC toll-free hotline **1-800-392-4211**, or by email **pscinfo@psc.mo.gov**.

The CSU consists of a small group of professionals with expertise in business administration or management, education, accounting, financial analysis, and consumer service. CSU personnel must be familiar with all utility billing procedures and practices, consumer rights and responsibilities as well as utility customer information systems and technology used by all regulated utilities. The Unit Staff must also know the state and federal laws that apply to customer credit and privacy. As an example, CSU is prohibited from discussing any of the details of a consumer complaint or inquiry with any outside parties.

CSU Staff interact daily with Commission Consumer and Management Analysis personnel, technical staff and PSC legal counsel, as well as with utility company representatives, in an effort to evaluate and resolve issues raised by consumers.



Holly McCubbin, Consumer Services Specialist, assists a customer.

What exactly do we do?

CSU Staff obtains detailed information from the consumer regarding his/her account and complaint issue. They also contact the utility to obtain like detailed information. CSU Staff tries to obtain as much information as possible from all sides. They then evaluate the information received to ensure compliance with Commission rules and regulations and the appropriate tariffs approved by the Commission.

With more complex matters, CSU Staff may need to obtain legal documents from the consumer, conduct investigations on locations or individuals and make personal contact with landlords or property owners. Once

they have all of the key information, CSU will conduct a thorough analysis, verify rates and charges, conduct checks and balances, verify legal documents and prepare a final report/letter. CSU then contacts the consumer and discusses the findings and followup with a written closure letter that concludes the investigation. If a consumer is not satisfied with the resolution, the customer is given information on the appeal process that he/she can follow.

At the same time CSU Staff is investigating complaints, it is also monitoring the overall aspects of consumer complaints and comments to determine if there is a possible trend that exists that may require a broader review of an issue.

Correct billing, appropriate customer service provided by the utility and payment agreements that may be defined in Commission rules or Commission-approved tariffs would be some examples that may require further and deeper review.

This may result in two possible actions: 1) determine if there is an immediate need to educate consumers on a particular subject matter; or 2) determine if there could be a possible rule violation by the utility that would warrant a formal complaint that would be initiated by the PSC Staff. On occasion, it could simply be a CSU contact to the utility to advise it of a noticeable trend that it may be unaware of, but that could be resolved rather quickly or in a timely manner.

The Consumer Services Unit has numerous work drivers such as consumers or the general public; actions taken by the utility company, the Public Service Commission, the Missouri Legislature, federal agencies (such as the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission); and last, but not least, the weather.

Missouri, like many states in the Midwest, experiences a number of issues related to the weather. Missouri often has extreme cold and hot temperatures, creating concerns for both the health and safety of consumers.

To help address those issues, the Public Service Commission established the Cold Weather Rule in 1977 and a law was passed in August of 2011 creating the Hot Weather Rule. Both contain a number of provisions designed to help consumers maintain heat-related service in the winter and cooling-related service in the summer. One such provision contains utility service shut-off moratoriums when temperatures fall below a certain level in the winter and rise above a certain temperature or heat index in the summer.



What are the most challenging components of the Consumer Services Unit work?

There are three key challenges: 1) keeping up with the ever changing compliance drivers (such as tariffs, rules, regulations, legislation, federal changes, and the unpredictable weather); 2) ever changing technology; and 3) consumer education.

These challenges are being addressed daily in the CSU through due diligence and consistency. CSU Staff have a number of checks and balances which help them monitor and manage these changes. They have daily, weekly and monthly reports. They have continual training on new technology drivers. They meet periodically with all utilities under PSC jurisdiction to discuss new technology drivers and how those will impact consumers, as well as, how the utility will manage the impact on its consumers. There is also cross-training

PSC CONSUMER SERVICES UNIT FY 2015 Summary

Total Contacts: 13,570

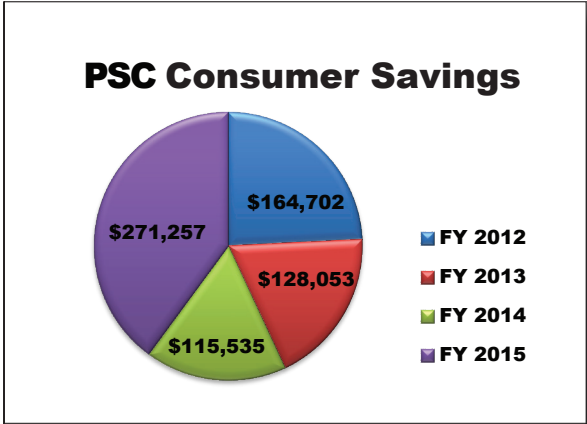
Complaints: 2,602
Public Comments: 3,906
Information Calls: 7,062

Complaints by Utility Type

Gas: 605
Electric: 1,215
Telephone: 364
Water: 358
Sewer: 60

Top 5 Complaint Issues

Discontinuance of Service
Denial of Service
High Bill
Rebill
Transfer Bill



of CSU Staff which enables them to step in and manage any change that may occur.

An important part of the mission of the Public Service Commission is consumer education. In 2012, the Commission increased its efforts in the area of consumer education and outreach. Part of that effort involved CSU and the Commission's Public Information Office working together to create a number of new educational materials to better inform consumers.

The CSU mission statement is simple but very effective: "Better regulation through Consumer Education". CSU Staff firmly believe a key component of their work is to ensure that the consumers are better informed and educated about utility service and their rights as a customer in order to make informed decisions regarding their utility services.

Public policy and technological advancements are altering the landscape of utility regulation and utility services. Some of the changes include environmental regulations, smart grid technologies, and an emphasis on energy efficiency and renewable energy. Customers need to be educated about changes that will potentially affect their utility services and bills.

The Public Service Commission believes consumer education and outreach is more important than ever given these rapid technological advances and public policy changes.

With that in mind, the Commission, in the fall of 2013, expanded its efforts in public outreach and education by:

- Collaborating with organizations throughout the state and embarking on a more detailed and extensive program designed to communicate information about utility services to the public;
- Empowering customers to take control over their utility bills; and
- Increasing awareness of the vital role the Commission plays in the day-to-day lives of Missourians.

The Commission also started participating in more community outreach events such as legislative town hall meetings, energy forums, health and senior fairs, back to school fairs and local public hearings, and a Community Outreach Coordinator was named to develop and implement a more comprehensive program for consumer education and outreach.

The Commission works with organizations such as community action agencies, Heat-Up St. Louis, local community back to school organizers and other community-based groups to provide education and educational materials on such subjects as: how to be energy efficient, what is budget billing, consumer bill of rights, special protections available to consumers during cold

winter weather and hot weather in the summer, Lifeline telephone service, payment arrangements, why there may be a deposit requested, and customer notice prior to a discontinuance of service.

These community events also give the Commission an opportunity to give consumers information on who the Public Service Commission is and what it does.

Some of these events attract thousands of consumers. They give the Commission an opportunity to talk with consumers in a large group setting on key issues. Other venues give the Commission an opportunity to meet one-on-one with consumers and address their particular questions or issues.

Communication and collaboration with these organizations is key to the Commission's outreach and education mission. The Commission appreciates the collaborative efforts that exist which enable it to provide effective community education.

Commission outreach and education efforts also include members of the Commission's Public Policy & Outreach Department and Consumer Services Unit and involve speaking engagements, serving as exhibitors at community events, public service announcements, social media activity, press releases, publications and local public hearings. Local public hearings are held by the Commission to seek public feedback on rate cases and other contested cases before the PSC.

In Fiscal Year 2014, the Commission participated in approximately 50 different consumer outreach venues (i.e., energy conservation and energy assistance forums, Earth Day events, health, senior and back to school fairs, cultural events and local public hearings). In Fiscal Year 2015, there were approximately 70 different outreach venues.

The Commission is committed to increasing its visibility and working with more community organizations to help consumers understand the utility issues of the day.



Contessa King, Outreach and Diversity Officer, speaks with an individual at a recent community event.

— **Gay Fred**, Manager of PSC Consumer Services Unit
Contessa King, PSC Outreach and Diversity Officer



How Can Consumer Services Help You?

PSC Consumer Services Staff can investigate an inquiry or dispute regarding:

- Rates or charges.
- Service installation or disconnection.
 - Responsibility for a bill.
 - A request for a deposit.
- A utility's refusal to provide service.
- The quality and type of utility service.
- Compliance of a utility's policies and procedures with Commission rules and regulations.

Consumer Services can provide additional information related to:

- Long distance issues (such as "slamming" or "cramming"); satellite TV; faxes; Internet; wireless communications; "800" and "900" number complaints; federally-mandated charges.
- Telemarketing and consumer fraud involving utility rates.
- Energy assistance contacts.

The PSC **DOES NOT** regulate:

- Cellphones
- Internet providers
- Paging services
- Cable television rates or service
 - Trash pick-up service
 - Financial institutions
- Retail telecommunications services
- Rates of municipally-owned utilities, rural cooperatives or public water and sewer districts



Need additional information or assistance from the PSC Consumer Services Unit?



Call: 1-800-392-4211

Fax: 1-573-526-1500



Online Complaint Form:

www.efis.psc.mo.gov/mpsc/complaintform.asp



Mail: Missouri Public Service Commission

P.O. Box 360

Jefferson City, Missouri 65102

ATTN: Consumer Services Unit

Are you interested in having a representative from the Missouri Public Service Commission at your next event?

Contact Contessa King,
Outreach and Diversity Officer,
at 573-751-5239 or toll free at
1-800-392-4211.

You may also send an email to:
contessa.king@psc.mo.gov.

We look forward to hearing from you