

Quality Of Service

By Debbie Bernsen

When a utility company files a rate case with the Public Service Commission, PSC Staff engineers, auditors, economists and financial analysts begin a full audit of the books and records of the company. Each cost of providing service to customers is carefully examined.

But costs are not the only items examined by the PSC Staff. The quality of service the utility company provides is also an important part of setting rates that are just and reasonable. Quality of service includes such things as safety and reliability, handling customer inquiries and company general management practices.

As a customer of a utility under the jurisdiction of the PSC, you should expect to receive safe and adequate service. Monitoring service closely doesn't just occur when a rate case is filed. Reporting procedures and practices are in place that provide basic information regarding the companies' performance on a regular basis. Commission safety jurisdiction extends to not only regulated utilities but to municipal gas and electric systems and electric cooperatives.

The PSC technical staff continually works in the field examining the systems that provide natural gas to heat your home in the winter; power plants which produce electricity to light, heat, and cool your home; treatment plants that ensure safe drinking water and sewer systems which assure the environmentally sound disposal of wastewater. PSC Staff also inspect telecommunications facilities as well as new manufactured homes and modular units. All of these field operations strive to ensure the safety and reliability of utility systems.

As an example, PSC Staff natural gas safety unit members are in the field throughout the year evaluating pipeline systems. The Commission has jurisdiction over all in-state natural gas pipeline operators including five intrastate transmission pipelines, six investor-owned natural gas distribution utilities and 41 municipally-owned natural gas distribution systems.

During the 2013 calendar year, PSC Staff in the natural gas pipeline safety section conducted 78 comprehensive office and field inspections, follow-up inspections, construction inspections and other investigations. These inspections/



PSC Staff Engineer John Kottwitz inspects a natural gas valve.

investigations resulted in staff being in the field over 605 inspection-person days.

The Consumer Services Unit of the PSC responds to information requests and investigates consumer complaints and inquiries regarding utility service.

Consumer Services Staff ensures utility compliance with Commission rules and regulations as well as with the utilities' Commission-approved tariffs. Full-time investigators handle a variety of consumer issues including: billing problems, payment arrangements, denial of service issues, disconnection and service connection issues, enforcement of rules and regulations and safety issues.

The Commission received over 16,400 customer-related contacts in the 2014 fiscal year. Often, Consumer Services investigators will file testimony and take positions on service related issues that are a part of a rate case filed by a utility company under PSC jurisdiction.

PSC Staff in the Commission's Engineering and Management Services Unit have the responsibility of performing analyses regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the utility managerial practices utilized by companies under the Commission's jurisdiction. Such an analysis is performed a variety of times including during the

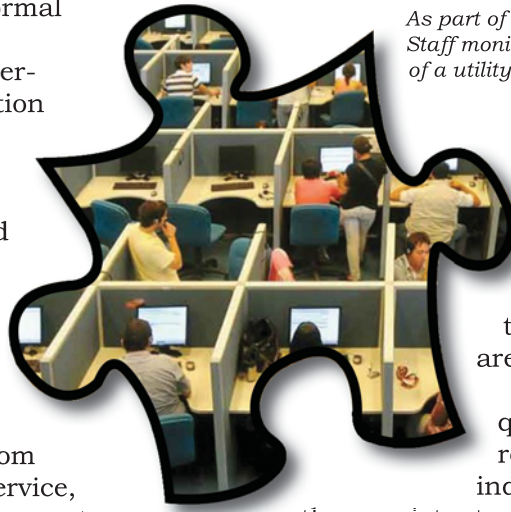
filing of a rate case and during informal review periods.

Meter reading and call center performance, billing, credit and collection activities, service order processes, payment remittance as well as service connection and disconnection activities are all areas reviewed by the PSC Staff. PSC Staff continually monitors the service provided to customers, working to ensure customers receive safe and adequate service.

Customers of a regulated utility generally have one source from which to obtain necessary utility service, and that is the utility that has been granted a Commission certificate of convenience and necessity. Under that certificate, that utility is typically the only utility that can provide the specific utility service within that specified area. They are a monopoly. In return, the utility is required to provide service (such as electricity or water) to all customers within that specified area who wish to receive such service. The utility company cannot choose who it serves. Costs associated with customer service are included in the rates customers pay.

The PSC Staff reviews the adequacy of customer service by examining a variety of service quality metrics, operating procedures, customer input and documentation. In addition, the PSC Staff maintains a data base of measurements on monthly call center performance for all gas, electric and a number of water companies under Commission jurisdiction. These reporting requirements have been developed over time by Commission orders or by formal agreements entered into between the PSC Staff and the utility company.

The PSC Staff maintains a number of quantitative indicators that track the performance of a call center regarding the center's responsiveness to customer calls and concerns. On an informal basis, the PSC Staff will contact the company if customer service metrics indicate a decline in the service being provided to customers. The



As part of an audit, the PSC Staff monitors the performance of a utility's call center.

PSC Staff will discuss with the company what actions are needed to correct the situation and will monitor the company's responses to ensure corrective actions are taken.

Some aspects of service quality, however, do not readily lend themselves to indicators. Examples include

the consistent application of credit and collection practices, detection and correction of billing errors and the effective training of call center representatives. The PSC Staff will also review operating procedures, billing rule compliance, utility customer complaints received by the Commission and customer opinion survey results.

Results of PSC Staff reviews are documented in reports that detail present practices and areas for potential improvements as well as violations of Commission rules and regulations, where detected. This report may be filed within a pending case with the company or provided to the company informally for its response. The PSC Staff conducts follow-up reviews to ensure that recommendations made for improvement are acted upon and addressed by the utility company.

If you have a service related issue with your utility company, we would encourage you to first contact the utility company to see if you can work out the issue. If the issue has not been resolved to your satisfaction after contact with the company, please call the Public Service Commission's Consumer Services Unit at 1-800-392-4211.

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