

REPRESENTATIVE POLICY BOARD
CONSUMER AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

FEBRUARY 24, 2025

MEETING TRANSCRIPTION

Naomi:

I'm going to call the meeting to order. It's 5:30. First, we'll go over our safety moment. Our safety moment this month is just preventing slips, trips, and falls. They did outline seven guidelines, which we should probably guide ourselves by. It's create good housekeeping practices, reduce water or slippery surfaces, avoid cleaning obstacles in aisles and walkways, create and maintain proper lighting, wear proper shoes, control individual behavior.

Another thing is just, as an FYI, is also make sure that if you're at a certain age, you don't have rugs and things on the floor because those too could also avoid you slipping.

Jennifer, are there any members from the public on tonight?

Jennifer:

No, there's not.

Naomi:

Okay, I'm moving to the next item, approval of the January 27th minutes. May I get a motion, please?

Stephen:

I'll move them.

Naomi:

Could I get a-

Charles:

I'll second.

Naomi:

Who seconds?

Charles:

Charles.

Naomi:

Charles? Okay. Are you ready for the question? It has been moved by Steve, seconded by Charles. Are you ready for the question? All those that are in favor, let it be known by saying aye.

Committee members:

Aye.

Naomi:

Those that are opposed have the same right. Okay, it's a motion. Moving on to the next item. Number Four, Customer Experience and Escalation Process by Prem and Dana.

Prem:

Thank you, Naomi. So I have some guests here and...

Naomi:

We saw.

Prem:

I just wanted to kind of, again, much of the content we'll discuss about our process, and experience, and what we do here, and some great stuff that we actually help our customers with. But before we go into the details, I just wanted to introduce Bridgette, who's our Assistant Customer Care Director. When did you join, Bridget? It's the fifth week?

Bridget:

It's actually the eighth, Monday.

Prem:

So Bridget's here. I think she's been doing really great and really gelling with the culture that we have here with RWA. So we thought it's a good idea. And many of you know Louise. She's our Customer Experience Manager, so she'll be talking a little bit.

Jeff will say all the great things that Louise does. They are tightly integrated, work together really well, making sure we are very proactive with our customers. But today's topic really is about our customer escalation process and how we manage our customer experience.

Again, this is a discussion. We have a few slides that the team will go through, but please stop and ask questions or any clarifications. We really want to promote more discussion and how we can support customers. And also, we have some suggestions towards the end of this presentation. We can talk about that as well, as to how RPB can work even more closely with us, and how we can support our customers even further. So with that, I'm not sure who's taking a-

Dana:

So Louise was going to do the base presentation. We can all chime in, help answer questions.

Prem:

Okay, great.

Dana:

Okay. Take it away.

Louise:

Well, so for those of you who don't know me, I have been with the authority for 31 wonderful years, going on my 31st year. So the customer experience role came into play in 2019 and it was because of the pandemic that we realized that we needed to look deeper into ways of understanding the customer experiences and make it more actionable and better.

So that you know, escalations that do escalate to my level are managed and acknowledged immediately upon receipt. Resolution can take several days depending on the other departments that may need to help me resolve the issue, but the customer is kept in the loop immediately.

Do you want to go to the next? Okay, thank you. The Regional water Authority rules and regulations are always enforced and reiterated to any customers, to keep all customers understanding of our fair and equitable treatment. That's a very important thing for us to do so that we do keep the consistency for all customers throughout our territory. We do a lot of teamwork and interdepartmental assistance to resolve any escalations that are presented to myself and anyone above me above. And our main goal is to resolve the escalation in a timely manner, without further escalation to Jeff, unless it's absolutely necessary, or the OCA.

So types of escalations. So we get a lot of billing questions and what I want to tell you about the billing is it's not that the billing is incorrect, it's basically making the customer understand a little bit better.

When it comes to the water services, usually those types of escalations are related to our rules and regulations. An example of why do I need a meter pit? Or what do you mean the Regional Water Authority doesn't own my own water service line? Questions like that.

When it comes to customer service, there's a variety of reasons. Just simple questions. When can I come to the office to pay? When we tell them eight to five, some customers are like, well, how come you're not open later and what's going on? And just basic customer service reasons.

And then for the non-core, it's just reassuring of commercial services and protection plants. They just want a better understanding of what is protected and what is not protected under the protection plants.

Dana:

Thank you very much for going through all that.

I think a couple of the things that I wanted to highlight too is when Louise mentioned when it gets to her level, really our CSRs are empowered to try to answer these questions and assist customers as best they can. Sometimes customers are just not happy with the first person who delivers the message and that's where we get things like the customer service escalations and things like that.

We also use these as opportunities to understand where our processes can be improved or how that we can better educate maybe a newer CSR who might not be familiar with something and it gets escalated. So we use those for training opportunities as well. And that interplay between the departments is so important because we need the expertise of our contracts and new services folks. We need the expertise of the operational folks as we're trying to understand, and resolve, and help a customer understand what the issue is.

And again, sometimes depending on the nature of the escalation, we've also done, Louise has headed up some lessons learned, some improvement opportunities that we found across the company, and it's really just important to keep those dialogues going.

The other thing that I also thought was really important that you mentioned Louise, is the feedback with the customer. It's continual. Louise is very, very good at that in managing the customers, their expectations, even if something might be taking a day or two longer than we would like. She's really

keeping them in the loop and having those conversations. So you saw through this a few charts and a couple different types of ways that we report out, both on the volume of escalations that we're getting, the types of escalations we're getting, and how quickly we're resolving them.

Charles:

On the graphic page. Can you just explain a graph? I don't understand. Ansonia, one. You have to have gotten more than one phone call in billing collections?

Louise:

So that would be an escalation that started with the care agent. They couldn't resolve the customer's issue. It went to a senior representative. From the senior representative, it then will come to me to say, we just can't get this customer to understand something or we need extra help.

Charles:

What does this graph represent then?

Louise:

So it represents that there was only one billing escalation, in this fiscal year, related to the town of Ansonia. That customer was in Ansonia.

Charles:

So that's what that number means?

Louise:

Yes.

Dana:

Only one had made it through those three processes. So it doesn't mean that they didn't have more questions. It means most are answered by our CSRs. Yes, most are handled by the CSR. Then often our more experienced senior reps who have a lot of years of service they can help resolve as well. And if they can't, then that's what you're looking at here. So it's the third step of the internal escalation process. And we really don't want a lot of numbers on page. Yes, we want our team to be able to address the customers fully and get that resolved on the first contact.

Prem:

I think that's a great point. And also just to add some more context in this whole situation, because this is just one channel of escalation when it comes to the contact center. The dashboard, which is a prior slide, before that slide, actually has a lot more details, which we're not going to link here. But it actually talks a little bit about different kinds of inputs.

Sometimes, very rarely, sometimes we get a customer escalation from Joe's team, I'm sorry, Jeff's team, to really kind of tell us that there are actually some of the complaints that funnels through that. So there's a whole channel for that specific escalation, which is very, very minor, very little that we get. And

then there are things that Louise gets from PURA, for example, sometimes customers don't know who they want to call. They call PURA. And then Louise has great relationship with PURA too.

So they send the escalation back to us saying that this customer needs some assistance and we take care of that. So all of those things happen in the purview of different inputs coming from different channels. But what you ask a question is a good question, Charles, right? It's really on focus on what is really making to the level where now Louise is involved or somebody above her is involved. If there are things resolved underneath, let's say CSR is able to resolve that, I think that's what we want. They are empowered resolving looks like she come to that level.

Charles:

A little bit of a red flag popped up in that conversation. You said PURA, that just means the public didn't know who to call so they called [inaudible 00:13:24] they figured they were going to start the fight early.

Louise:

Yes.

Dana:

Or yes, exactly.

Louise:

Or to your point, they still don't like the answer. And even though we say we're not governed by PURA, they say, oh well I'm just going to make a case with them anyway. And just so you know, when PURA does send me their complaint, it says not governed by PURA, just responds to customer.

Charles:

Can you give [inaudible 00:13:53] out of all these that escalated on this chart, how many do you think came through PURA? Or had some PURA contact?

Louise:

I would say, five.

Charles:

Out of all of them?

Louise:

Of out of the 22 that are [inaudible 00:14:07].

Prem:

Also remember-

Charles:

We want to discourage that. So that may indicate let's get some more information out there about who you should be. I mean there's going to be a certain group of people that just going to pick up [inaudible 00:14:23].

Dana:

And we do. There's certainly always opportunity to communicate more, but we do include OCA as the points of contact on the back of our bills. It's on the website and I know when Louis is talking with them, that's often the conversation. If PURA's not going to help you, you can go to OCA. We communicate with Jeff. Louise, I don't know, tons of emails, it feels like, Jeff. Now that's an exaggeration. We've actually been able to manage these. I feel quite well Louise has kind of helped to stem escalations and as you've seen from Jeff's reports out over the last few months, there's not a lot that's actually making complaints over here.

Stephen:

Dana, this is Steve. Why are these customers going to PURA? Do they not understand or are they a certain type of complaint?

Dana:

Actually, I think it's mostly a do not understand, or just unhappy that we are not regulated by PURA, right? That's their outlet for their other utility concerns or issues, and I think that's just where they naturally go. Right? We must go to the regulating body and despite the fact that we have those communications, that information is out in the public that this is our governing body and that you can raise the complaints to OCA. I think it's just a natural inclination of customers. It's not any one type of complaint that goes there. It's really just the channel that customers are looking for. And fortunately PURA really supports us, and the way we are governed, and really just forwards those back to us. ,

Prem:

I think the key piece, Steve, is to really make sure that when it comes to us, we are again to customer satisfaction, we resolve the issue. So I think there are different kinds of customers. Some of them are really good and we start explaining to them how things are, what it is. And again, we reference back to rules and regs that we remember we talked about that and we take a look at rules and regs and that's consistent across all customers.

So there are different kinds of customers, but the good news is that if you see in terms of the resolution rate, we don't have a single customer where we have a problem that's persistent. And so we have resolved all the issues, which is the good news. So we take care of everything that is required.

The other thing that I want to mention, very quickly, is there are some things that we also do as part of our goals and metrics. If you remember, we talk about customer satisfaction survey, the 91.8% goal that we, had plus or minus 4% for the industry average. We have been doing very well in that sense. And I think we even did some study on where do we stand on in between different water companies and we also compare in Connecticut. So we always scored higher, way higher. The industry average for satisfaction is 77%. We always stay along the lines of 91%, which is a big deal for the company, and the size we are.

The other thing that, more recently, we also have introduced last year was the first contact resolution goal. Again, I'm sure team has a lot of information about it. So we are looking at striving on improving 15

percentage points from last year to this year. So we are measuring that and we are actually measuring from the feedback from the customer. So this is almost a feedback loop to make sure that we are addressing anything that comes in and we are striving for the best in class. So just wanted to mention that.

So we have all of these global metrics and goals that we track from our perspective, to make sure we hit those really well. So I think, again, the team does a great job. So I think we are able to kind of keep those prices lower, especially with the environment we are in now. I think it's very much necessary that we keep everything down. So we're doing a good job. So just want to add the color right on the metrics and stuff.

Stephen:

Well the charts indicate you've got a fairly low level of escalations here. What are you starting with in terms of calls? How many get resolved immediately?

Dana:

We average between six and 7,000 calls a month. And of that you see we have about 22 escalations.

Stephen:

Wow, that's pretty good.

Naomi:

That's pretty good.

Stephen:

That's really good.

Dana:

Thank you. Very proud of the team.

Louise:

Yes.

Prem:

That's a fraction of it. Yes.

Louise:

And so Steve, just to let you know too, when for instance, the UI bills changed and customers were upset about another utility, the customer would then look at the water bill and just say, oh, we have never seen this service charge before. Now are you just like the UI? What are you doing? And so those types of things would come, would escalate, because the customer didn't believe it. And within hours of me speaking with them, they would finally understand that it isn't something new, and we're not following suit, like the other utility UI. When they were in the news is when those complaints came through to us to handle.

Stephen:

Okay. We get some spillover.

Louise:

Yes.

Stephen:

When they first call, how aware are they of the rules and regulations of the water authority?

Louise:

Well, so again, depending on the type of call, and the reason for the call, I think by the time they've actually, depending on the type of call, they will hear it once from the CSR. They will hear it a second time from the senior person, and then they'll hear it from me for the third time, to make sure that we're all consistent with what we're saying.

Stephen:

Okay. I'm assuming I haven't checked lately, the rules and regulations are on the website?

Dana:

Correct.

Louise:

Yes. Yes.

Stephen:

Okay. So they can verify everything that you're telling us?

Prem:

Yes.

Naomi:

My question is for Louise. Louise, what does the lavender represent in the town of East Haven?

Louise:

That's the non-core commercial services. Pipe safe, well safe.

Naomi:

Okay.

Louise:

Yes. So there was that one customer that had some complaint related to what the protection plan covered, and why it did or didn't apply to them.

Naomi:

Okay, thank you.

Louise:

You're welcome.

Jamie:

This is Jamie, and Prem, I think this presentation is really well done and you guys are working, you're doing a really good job. Prem, you said earlier that, I think what you were saying was that there was a satisfactory, a survey done and we were at 91% satisfaction overall. How does that compare, do you know, nationwide or regionally?

Prem:

We use Great Blue, Jamie, that's a great question. And they do quite a bit of work in the water industry. There are many more like JD, of course, there are a bunch of other companies who do a lot of work. Great Blue does a lot of local work for water. We did a comparison of, we asked them, because they also do it for Connecticut Water, they also have [inaudible 00:22:09], so it's like they have a good level of comparison across, not just for Connecticut, but across the nation. So when we asked them this question, the industry average was 77%. So that is the industry average for good CSI from a water perspective.

Jamie:

That's awesome.

Prem:

Ours is way up the charts. Which is good.

Jeff:

How does that compare to other utilities?

Prem:

Well, I think I can put it this way. Of course, they cannot share the information. They can't compare directly. So they will talk about industry average, what it is, and they won't say [inaudible 00:22:47] is so much, you're so much. They would never do that.

So one of the things that they do is they give us a ballpark of how we are doing other utilities. I would say from a Connecticut perspective, we are in the top. We are in 5%, which is actually good. So again, there are various factors they look at. And then the way they look at is based on, not only just we do a lot of things, not just on the call center or contact center. We also do for field service, for example. So the other initiative we launched last year was also both field service satisfaction. [inaudible 00:23:22] are very much collaborating with, and again, the team is collaborating with Brian, who's our field services manager from that side, and Jim Helstein.

We work really well and we try to address things where sometimes that's not an avenue where a customer faces our field reps in the field. We get some great feedback from there as well. And we have

put in some recommendation based on that last year. So we are actually fearing well on that as well. So, again, Kudos Jim's team. The team does a great job and we collaborate really well with each other.

I think we are trying to cover every front possible where we have, again, next month you'll hear a little bit more about our future program that's coming to go live and all the communication stuff. That's a whole separate topic on what we're trying to help the customer, how it's going to be and all that. But you'll see a lot more communication and collaboration. We are trying to get in front of customer so we don't have any questions from their perspective. So we try to resolve as much as we can.

So that's all we have for today. If there's no more questions, I think, great discussion. And one question I do have for the RPD members is a lot of great questions we have and thank you for all the collaboration. And as you could see there are specific escalation that comes into different towns. We could actually share some information as we share proactively with OCA. Jeff's team really helps us a lot in that space so we can also share that information.

I know we probably, most recently, have been seeing that we are coming forward, and again, Jennifer is also helping us. As soon as she hears something, we come back and provide that information for the RPD members. So if the team is okay, we'll continue to do that. We'll keep you in the loop so you are aware of what's going on so you don't hear from the mayor's office, we rather you hear it from us proactively. That's going to really help us, Bill, and if you have any questions coming from the customer, Steve, you already are aware of it, right? So if the team is okay, we'll continue to do that, and we'll bring those things in the forefront. Is there another question?

Stephen:

Prem, this is Steve. I have one more question for Louise. Have you always been in customer service with the water authority?

Louise:

So I started in collections in customer service, then I moved to pipe safe. I was the pipe safe team lead and I'm now back in customer service. So yes, I've always been customer front-facing.

Stephen:

And over that time, have you seen any change in the type of questions or any other sort of observations over that time?

Louise:

No, nothing new. In the 31 years I've been doing it, I do believe that customers are very in tuned with us as an authority, that most of the customers are very impressed and are grateful for the products and services that we provide. So I don't see anything that's really warranting anything that we need to do above and beyond what are already doing. But in the event we have a customer that does raise something to an issue, we do bring it to other team members to say, how can we improve the experience? So we have lessons learned here.

Stephen:

Okay, our customer base, I mean, people may move around a little bit, but I would imagine customers are long-term customers for the water authority?

Louise:

Yes, that's correct. We have many, many customers that continue to purchase properties within our service territory, and are very familiar with everything that has to do with the authority. From the billing, to the quality of the water, to anything else, even just how come their grass isn't growing? We answer all kinds of questions for customers.

Stephen:

Okay, thank you.

Louise:

You're welcome.

Naomi:

Okay. All right. Okay. Any more questions from anybody? Okay. Prem, Dana, Bridget, and Louise. I want to thank you very much for your time.

Louise:

Thank you.

Naomi:

Okay. Report of the LCA. Jeff?

Jeff:

Thank you. Just to kind of put a cap on the discussion that you had from Prem, and Louise, and Dana, and Bridget, in terms of the escalation process. The matters that are escalated to the OCA, we've talked in the past about what our process is. In terms of reaching out to the customer immediately, getting anything from the customer that they want to share with us, whether it's talking to us in person on the phone, sending us information, explaining to them what the process is. And then getting information from the authority so that we can act as a liaison for the customer in attempting to resolve the matter with the authority. And we don't have a lot of matters that are ultimately escalated to us, but when we're unable to resolve a matter with the customer, of course under our rules, the final step is for us to make a recommendation to the authority and the customer, and if either the authority or the customer is not happy with the recommended resolution. The final step is a hearing at the Consumer Affairs Committee.

And in 16 and a half years I think we've had three of those such hearings. But that ultimately is how it plays out when the customer isn't satisfied with both the authority's proposed resolution and the OCA's recommendation.

Right now we have a couple of matters, actually four matters that have come across my desk in the last month. Only one of which is really an escalated matter at this point. The most recent was a customer last week in Ansonia. Louise, and Prem, and Dana, and Bridget do a really good job of keeping me in the loop, even though something isn't formally escalated, when it looks like it may be heading in that direction, just to give me a heads-up. More often than not, it gets resolved without me getting involved.

This particular one is a customer that's simply questioning why a credit of \$80.09 cents hasn't been applied to her account.

So we found out last Wednesday that the customer's concerned about it, wrote a letter to the authority about it, and the authority is looking into exactly what's holding up the credit, or what the appropriate credit should look like to reconcile that account. So that's not an escalation, that's just something that we were made aware of, and it's a Milford resident. So Rich Smith, as the Milford rep was made aware that that issue is out there as well.

The second matter is, a customer in Ansonia who doesn't want to pay for a manual meter reading, but also won't allow a flex net installation. So that did get kicked to me at the end of last month. I reached out to the customer. The customer has not responded to me as of yet.

The other two matters involve extension and potential extensions of service, and the fees associated with extensions of service. One customer in New Haven had a lot of questions about how the authority was calculating the fee and that customer has been satisfied. So we don't have anything left to do on that front.

And then we have another customer in Derby who contacted the authority back in 2023 about potentially extending the main because his son, there's a vacant piece of property near the customer's property that the son wants to build a single family home on. So the authority went out there in the fall of 23. They generated a contract for a main extension. It was pretty pricey. Customer was, very, very, very civil, very polite, very professional, very nice. Customer wasn't happy with the cost. So they met out on site, the customer and the authority did, and they came up with a alternative. And that alternative cut the price by almost 50%, but it's still a lot of money.

The customer wanted to meet on site again, to go over different options, and the authority met them on site again, in the fall of 23. They came up with a deferred short extension contract and a note so that the \$30,000 cost could be paid via 12 monthly installments. Customer just really isn't happy with the cost, really isn't happy with the rules and regs, and the need to pay that kind of money for a potential extension.

So at this point, we've told the customer that we will go ahead and issue our final recommendation to the authority and to the customer. And if the customer wants a hearing with the Consumer Affairs Committee, he can come on down and have a hearing. But the RWA has rules and regs for main extensions. And there's a specific rule that provides essentially that each extension terminates at the farthest property line of the last potential taker to be served by the extension.

And in cases where the applicant can connect to the existing main, the authority has the option to defer the installation of all or a portion of an extension until further extensions required on the street. And at the time of the application, the RWA then notifies the applicant of the obligation to pay. So this would be a deferred extension. It's half the price of the main extension that would cover the entire frontage of the property. But the customer's still, again, very polite, very civil, very professional, very easy to deal with. Just figures, "Hey, I got nothing to lose. I'd like as much relief as I could get because \$30,000 is still a lot of money." So we'll write that one up, make a final recommendation. If the customer wants a hearing, then we'll follow the process and set up a hearing. That's it.

Stephen:

Hey, Jeff, is 30,000 or the reduced price?

Jeff:

Yes.

Stephen:

And what is it? Just to go one property? Just to go one property further?

Jeff:

No, I don't have a, I actually don't have a map in front of me, but it's not one property further.

Prem:

A matter of fact, it was across the street and I believe 300 feet extension. So there's a lot of details in this, Steve. Right? And to Jeff's point, I think we are going to put together a recommendation to see. [inaudible 00:36:03] the price, but obviously we will take a look at it. We are also providing some options [inaudible 00:36:09] planned.

But it goes back on what does the customer is willing to pay and obviously with cost. Right? They're not making money on it. Right? It's really on cost. So it's almost like we are trying to do the best in terms of our offer. And we'll see how it goes. And to Jeff's point, we'll circle back and if he still raises a question, then we'll have a conversation, I guess. But it is still-

Stephen:

I mean, that's a lot of money for the service. Is it possible that there are other properties and customers that might be interested so that multiple people might be helping to pay for an extension?

Prem:

I don't think that's an option in this case. I believe this is the property at the tail end of the street. So there's nothing that's going to be extended further out on other side, Steve, so this is purely the process.

Jeff:

Yes, it's a cul-de-sac. One of the things that the customer has, I don't want to say challenged because again, he's being, the customer's great to deal with, but. He owns a property to the rear that abuts his property. And again, he wants this service for a property that his son's going to build a home on. But the customer that we're dealing with, he owns a property that's in Ansonia that abuts his property and he thought, "Hey, we could bring the service through my other property."

But it kind of creates a bit of a mess in terms of the service. Because the terrain, there's challenges to it that don't make it very attractive and it really wouldn't save him any money.

But he understands and he just figures, "Hey, you know what, if there's a process where I could appeal to one more group of people, then what do I have to lose?"

Naomi:

Okay. Is that it, Jeff?

Jeff:

Yes. Thank you.

Naomi:

Okay. Could I get an approval of Jeff's invoice for January?

Stephen:

So moved.

Naomi:

Can I get a second?

Rich:

Second?

Naomi:

Second. Okay. You have heard the motion. It has been moved by us, Steve, and second by Rich. You ready for the question? All those that are in favor, let it be known. Those that are opposed have the same right. Hearing none. Seeing none. It's a vote.

Any new business?

I just want to, I'm quite sure everybody received this email. Jennifer sent out an email on Friday. I've never seen this before, but it's called the Corporate Social Ready Responsiveness Report. So if everybody gets a chance, just look at it in your email. It has some good information about the different towns and other things that the water company is doing. Our next meeting will be on March 17th at 5:30.

Prem:

Thank you. This is great. Thank you everyone.

Naomi:

Yes. Okay, Prem.

Naomi:

Okay. Can I get a motion for adjournment, please?

Rich:

So moved.

Naomi:

Okay everyone. Good night.