

**BEFORE THE WASHINGTON
UTILITIES AND TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION**

Re: Rulemaking to Consider Adopting a Rule
in WAC 480-120, Telephone Companies,
Relating to Standards for Restoring Regulated
Telecommunications Services Following an
Outage and Customer Notification of Planned
Service Interruptions

DOCKET NO. UT-170031

OPENING COMMENTS OF THE
WASHINGTON INDEPENDENT
TELECOMMUNICATIONS ASSOCIATION
(WITA)

By Notice of Opportunity to File Written Comments (Notice) dated February 2, 2017, the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (Commission) has called for comments on the Commission's filing with the Code Reviser a Proposal Statement of Inquiry (CR-101) to consider adopting a rule to address repair standards for service interruptions and impairments, excluding major outages. These comments are the Opening Comments of the Washington Independent Telecommunications Association (WITA).

WHY IS A RULEMAKING NEEDED?

As the first item, WITA believes it would be helpful if there is an understanding as to why the Commission is undertaking this effort. WITA knows of no problems among its members in making expeditious repairs of service interruptions and impairments. Further, WITA's member companies are unaware of any customer complaints or concerns on the subject. If there are no customer concerns and service is restored expeditiously, what is the need for a rule?

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WITA believes that there should be a problem which is identified and fully spelled out before an agency undertakes to adopt a "cure" for the problem in the form of a rule. Costs and obligations should not be imposed upon regulated entities without a delineation of the specific problems that gave rise to the imposition of additional costs and obligations. Further, WITA's member companies have long been exempt from the imposition of additional requirements. See, RCW 80.04.530. While the statute specifically addresses reporting requirements, the spirit of the legislation is to keep small incumbent telecommunications providers clear from the imposition of additional regulatory costs and obligations.

Further, telecommunications has become a highly competitive industry. WITA member companies provide excellent customer service to their customers as a way of differentiating them from other providers in the market place. If WITA member companies do not expeditiously provide the service and take care of customer concerns, the customers will vote with their feet and find a new provider. Additional regulation is not needed to provide an incentive for WITA member companies to continue to perform in the manner in which they have in the past and do so today.

Having set out WITA's concern about the basic need for any rulemaking on this subject, WITA will now turn to address the five specific questions raised by the Commission in the Notice.

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

1. What is a reasonable amount of time within which a company should be able to restore service following an outage in the absence of circumstances beyond the company's control?

RESPONSE: WITA member companies strive to repair a service outage that is not a major outage within one business day. WITA member companies are largely successful in meeting that goal. However, there are circumstances that do arise where the service restoration goal cannot be met. In those circumstances, the issue is usually escalated from the technician level to the management level and decisions are made as to what resources to bring to bear to solve the problem and make the repair as expeditiously as possible. As a result, while there can be a goal, it is not always possible to meet the goal. WITA does not believe adoption of an inflexible standard would be in the best interest of all concerned.

2. Does your company have service quality measures or standards for the time it takes to restore service after an outage? If so, what are those measures or standards?

RESPONSE: Not generally. However, see the response to question 1.

3. What costs does a company incur to restore service within this amount of time? What additional costs would a company incur to restore service within a shorter period of time?

RESPONSE: WITA members do not specifically track their costs to repair a particular service issue. Such additional accounting and paperwork would be counterproductive to the goal of getting the service reinstalled or repaired as quickly as possible.

An example may help. The clock is started the second a ticket is opened. The clock stops when the ticket is resolved, closed or cancelled. Thus, the way it works today, if a customer calls in at 10 am, the tech is on-site at 8:30 am the following day and fixes the problem by 9:30. The tech immediately moves on to the next service appointment and does not make it back to the office to clear the ticket until noon. The service center reports the ticket was not

completed within 24 hours. Therefore, it looks like the company missed the repair window even though the customer is happy.

For some WITA members, for example Kalama and Tenino, the trouble ticket is not closed until a Customer Service Representative has contacted the customer to be sure the customer is satisfied. This can take two or three days. Thus, even though the repair is often made the same day the trouble ticket is opened, the ticket may be open for several additional days.

A standard set in rule would require the tech to focus more on paperwork than fixing problems. It would also disrupt the way WITA members handle service repair issues today. WITA member companies would rather focus on good customer service, not paperwork to meet unneeded metrics.

4. Should the Commission establish a benchmark for service restoral (e.g., a certain percentage of outages restored within a specified period of time)? If so, what costs would a company incur to track and report on its performance using this benchmark?

RESPONSE: WITA strongly urges that the Commission not establish a benchmark for service restoral. For WITA member companies this has not been an issue. As noted, service restoral is usually within one business day. A benchmark would only create unneeded paperwork and interfere in addressing customer problems.

Adopting additional requirements to require the company to track and report its performance against the benchmark would be to impose additional, costly paperwork that would get in the way of repairing the service. In addition, RCW 80.04.530 would prevent the Commission from requiring WITA member companies to report service restoral performance.

5. How and when do companies currently notify customers of a planned service outage?

RESPONSE: In most cases, customers are not notified of planned service outages. The reason for not providing customer notice is that the WITA member companies usually perform such maintenance service in the hours of the least amount of traffic, usually late at night or early in the morning. For example, between 1 and 3 a.m. While this inconveniences employees and causes the company to incur overtime costs, it creates the least interruption for customers. Under these circumstances, costly customer notification is not needed and would actually not produce any additional benefit for the customers.

That said, for some WITA companies, if the company is able to identify the customers affected by a major maintenance project or an equipment upgrade, they have, at times, notified those customers of the maintenance time and sometimes the nature of the work. For example, Kalama and Tenino do this when the work is for a specific remote. Notice is provided by postcard and lets the customer know that there could be an interruption in service and sometimes lets the customers know what new service will soon be available.

If there is an unusual circumstance where a WITA member company will do a planned service outage that could affect a business when it is in operation (some businesses do operate 24x7) or it is known the business has network monitoring equipment that runs 24x7, and, in particular, E911 operations, the company will directly notify those businesses and entities of the period of the planned outage. However, general customer notice is not provided.

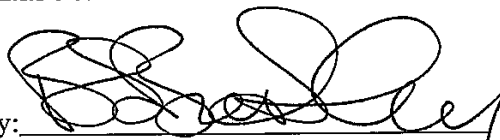
CONCLUSION

WITA believes that a rule on restoring service outside of major outages is not warranted and is unneeded. WITA respectfully requests that the Commission either not move forward with this rulemaking or, if there is some need that does not apply to WITA member companies, then exempt WITA member companies from the rule.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

Respectfully submitted this 6th day of March, 2017.

WASHINGTON INDEPENDENT
TELECOMMUNICATIONS ASSOCIATION

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