

Representative Policy Board  
**CONSUMER AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**  
September 19, 2022

Meeting Transcription

Stephen:

It is 5:32, and I will call the Consumer Affairs Meeting to order. First item on the agenda is the safety moment. And Jennifer has always come up with some good safety tips for the fall. Please take a look at that. Item two on the agenda is the approval of the minutes. Do I have a motion?

Tony:

So moved.

Stephen:

Thanks Tony. Second?

Rich:

Second.

Stephen:

Thank you, Rich. Give everyone a second to look at them if they haven't. Are there any omissions, corrections, additions? Hearing none. I'll call for a vote. All those in favor of approval.

Group:

Aye.

Stephen:

Any opposed? Any abstentions? Minutes carry unanimously. Thank you. Today we have an update from Prem and Dana on the customer care business activities. So I'll turn it over to you, Prem.

Prem:

Thank you, Steve. Good evening, everyone. So we thought it probably is a good time to take a look at some of our updates. It's been a while, and I know last time we met was almost six months ago, and also we had a recent change in terms of Laura Gonzalez. If you remember Steve, she retired. So Dana has taken over, and some of you have already been working with her as well. So we thought it's a good idea to talk a little bit about the transition plan, and we are also looking at a few key metrics, and also some of the customer kudos and escalations. So that being said, I would hand it over to Dana. Dana, if you could walk us through a little bit, very high level. And some of the updates would be nice.

Stephen:

Prem, can I ask a couple of questions first?

Prem:

Sure.

Stephen:

Laura Gonzalez. Did she retire?

Prem:

Yeah, she retired. Yeah. She retired as of end of August timeline. So it was great. She actually had a very good transition plan before she retired. She did a good plan. We did a primary, secondary approach, Steve. So we had a good three to four months time, so Dana can transition into the role. So it was pretty good.

Stephen:

Okay. And how long was she with the organization?

Prem:

She joined a little earlier than me, so almost around four and a half years, I would say. Four and a half to five years. Yeah.

Stephen:

Now, who's going to do what Dana was doing, and is she taking over Laura's role completely.

Prem:

Yeah.

Stephen:

Is she going to explain this?

Prem:

No, she's not going to explain it, but I can explain a little bit more. So Larry, myself, Dana did have a lot of conversation about Dana's old role. This is the process excellence director role, focused on what we're doing. We are back filling the role, that's part of the process. Right now, Dana is very much focused on customer care, as she wanted to be very successful in here for her. So I'm helping the team to doing the transition here. And I'm trying to help to make sure that we backfill the role. So we will be backfilling the role. It's not going to be dissolved, so hopefully that helps, Steve.

Stephen:

Okay. Yeah. And Dana went through the whole CIS process too, so she's good.

Prem:

That's perfect, yeah. She'll be covering some of the activities there as well. You can hear from her directly, I guess.

Stephen:

Well, I didn't know if you were going to be asking her to do two jobs.

Prem:

No, we are not.

Stephen:

Okay.

Prem:

That's good. Yeah.

Stephen:

I was just going to get you double pay, Dana. That's all.

Dana:

Okay. I like the way you think, but I much prefer the replacement. It's way too much for one person.

Prem:

I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Dana:

No. No problem at all. Prem touched quickly on the agenda. Again, we'll talk about the transition, some recent business activities. We'll talk a little bit about some feedback we've been getting from customers, and some key metrics that I wanted to share with you guys today. If you could go to the next slide, Jennifer. Thank you. As Prem mentioned, Laura retired effective August 31st. RWA has been very gracious in the transition plan in that we had many months together, Laura and I to work through that transition. She spent a lot of time with me, helping me understand more detailed overview of the various SOPs, systems that they're using, access to things that I really had not been exposed to in my previous roles at RWA. So when you think about things like our Via phone systems or our Red Box phone monitoring and calling systems, so there's a lot of other systems, very specific to this role that I had an opportunity to learn and get familiar with while she was here.

She and I actually partnered over the course of this duration on a lot of key decisions, including some hiring that was done for some new CSRs. I'll touch a little bit on that in a minute. And then certainly, sharing that perspective of the CIS project as we worked through all of those things, both in terms of the system selections. We wore a little bit of two hats while we were doing that, so that I have actually been very happy to actually be transitioning from the person who advocated through the RFP process for a particular path with the team and selection team, as opposed to now being the actual stakeholder owner of the system, and the solution as it comes into operational, pending Thursday's vote, of course, but being the owner of that CIS solution moving forward. She actually helped as well with the variety of vendor introduction.

So again, there are a lot of components when you're owning a particular process in this meter to cash an operational realm, where there are vendors that I did not have the opportunity to come into contact with before. So she helped me make a lot of those introductions so that I have those resources available

as I move forward. And of course, during this time we had our fiscal year end. We partnered, again, together on the reviews and the feedback for all of the team members that report to me now moving forward. Great opportunity.

I actually took on in June. I met with not only my direct reports in this new role, but with all of the frontline personnel. So I actually met with all of the CSRs, cashiers, specialists, really trying to understand their role, hearing some of their feedback and perspectives, and really had a great perspective as I move into some of this day-to-day operation. It seemed to have been received quite favorably by the employees themselves. And I have felt that so far, it's actually been great to pull on that a little bit as I talk to them or something comes up in the daily operations, to be able to know I've had these conversations and can be able to talk to them.

I'm actually continuing some of the functional adoption by having some interdepartmental meetings that I'll be scheduling over the next three to four weeks. I want to have more conversations with finance, as some different things that are coming up. I want to have more conversations with field service and our operations folks, as well as engineering contracts, new service. When we think about our customers, all of those areas are touching them in some way, and all of my team's processes are affecting them in some other way. So we want to make sure that I have a good understanding of that, building those partnerships and relationships so that everything is on a positive footing as we move forward. So just wanted to touch on that a little bit. It's a lot. Again, it's neat, because I'm coming from inside the company to take it over. But again, the perspectives and the responsibilities are completely different. So just wanted to highlight some of the opportunities that I've had, and things I'm doing to try to adopt in terms of that transition. Does anybody have any questions or feedback on any of that?

Stephen:

Her title was Director. You're going to stay that, Customer Care Director. Is that your role?

Dana:

Yes.

Stephen:

Okay.

Dana:

You can go to the next slide, Jennifer.

Stephen:

Any other questions?

Dana:

[inaudible 00:11:40].

Stephen:

Go ahead.

Dana:

Some of the key activities that have been occurring, even in just this short time, again, it's only two or three weeks since she's actually left. But as I mentioned, we have been filling some open positions. We actually are making an offer today to another open position that we have. If others are familiar with the advanced data analyst role, we are actually making an offer today, and looking at those CSR openings. We've had some personnel transitions as well amongst the union folks. And we'll be looking to make sure that we're fully staffed, moving forward. The collection strategy is another key area of RWA. As you know, we report out on receivables and we're looking at how we can be most effective in terms of understanding all of the different collection strategies we have and the tools available to us, working closely with our accounts receivable analyst and finance, as we're working to get a better handle on some of those and the right and proper tools for helping customers understand and meet some of those payment obligations, and that we're doing it effectively.

As you know, resuming the collection activities, I believe you know we put collections on pause for a couple of months. We've had some limited collections activity during COVID. Again, shutting customers was not something we were doing during COVID, and we actually put an additional pause, again, one of those strategic decisions Laura and I made together in June and July, so that we could focus on some of our contact center metrics, and get some improved performance there while we were not doing shuts. And so, we changed our tactics there a little bit. We were resuming those as well in September. And I've been spending a lot of time looking at telephony, working from the technology side previously, as well as in this role with Laura now, I'm really trying to understand a lot of the reports, the queuing that we're doing, how the IVR is functioning. Some of the ways our customers are routed and moved through our queues as they wait for us to answer their phone calls.

And there seems to be some opportunities for me. I'm going to point at me for the moment, to understand how some of those things are interacting a little bit better. I'll be fully transparent here and just say that some of the numbers don't make sense to me from one report to another, so I'd really like to try to understand why there's a disconnect. I think it's just about understanding how the queues are flowing, but again, just want to share with you that I'm really reviewing some of that telephony, how calls come into us and what happens to them when they get there. It seems like it should be very simple, but there's actually a lot going on in those flows, and I want to make sure that they're working as we design them.

We'll be looking at the IVR analysis as well. So all of that self-service capability that we offer to our customers, to ensure that's functioning as desired. And then looking at our self-service diagnostics. We are trying to drive more self-service where customers are interested in using those features. And I want to make sure that they're able to do that successfully with the right types of options available to them. So these are areas where I'm trying to focus early on, and again, make sure that these tools we have are best serving our customers.

Prem:

Can I add something very quickly? So tying back to the strategic goals and our objectives for the team here. So if you remember, we were looking at the JD Power survey that we did, and then we looked at, what are the recommendations? So one of them, if you remember, we talked about a first contact resolution. We also heard from our RPB members here, and the board as well. So we have really launched what we call a customer survey. This is a first contact resolution survey. So basically to benchmark and make sure that we can achieve our strategy goals. So we've been spending quite a bit of time and we successfully launched that, and we are tracking that. That's the good news there. And we'll

be focusing more on how we can improve those baseline numbers, but more to come on that. Just wanted to add that.

Stephen:

Okay. I have a couple of questions for Dana on the telephony. The queuing strategies are how you move people through the system?

Dana:

Yes. So essentially, as a customer comes into our phone system and they say, I have a billing question, or they choose that option at the beginning of the menu, they go into a certain queue, which comes to the contact center. If they were to say pipe safe, they would go into a different queue that goes to the pipe safe CSRs. So that's at the very simplistic levels too, but even within that, there are different things that happen to that customer in terms of what messages they hear as they wait for a CSR to answer, how long they wait before we might take some different actions such as perhaps roll them over to our Edwards answering service, or perhaps play a different message for them and encourage them perhaps to use the IVR.

So when I talk about that strategy, it's really, what is that customer experience as they're waiting for us to answer the call. Hopefully those waits are very short. That is always our objective, but there are things that happen to them that they'll experience as they wait for us to answer that call. So that's really what that's meant to reflect.

Stephen:

I'm asking a few questions, because I've had some very frustrating experiences recently with self-service organizations. You have to anticipate what might be coming in so that a person can select something that's appropriate, or they keep getting turned around and back to the main menu. Anyway, what's IVR again? This is your self-service, right?

Dana:

Yes.

Stephen:

What does IVR stand for?

Dana:

Interactive Voice Response. And essentially, it's really that opportunity for customers. Technically, even when they're saying, I want billing, that's part of our IVR. It's using voice cues or punch keys to be queued around appropriately. But it also is the mechanism for self-service for payments. Customers can use our IVR to make a payment without ever having to speak to a CSR. We do understand different customers have different preferences for that type of service. One of the reasons we do try to encourage it, is also for PCI compliance, again, sharing credit card numbers, things like that. That's something from a security perspective, we want to try to discourage our CSRs from having access to. We are not a certified PCI compliant organization, we rely on our payment vendors for those features. And so again, trying to find that right balance for our customers. But yes, IVR does that as well.

Stephen:

Okay. And can you give me an example of the diagnostics part of it? So you're looking at that system?

Dana:

Yeah. I'm looking at the IVR. I'm also looking at our new portal. So trying to look at how and when customers are using that and what types of forms and features we offer them. Are they working in an ideal way? And again, we've had it now for about seven, eight months, pretty active customer participation in it. And I really think it's time for us to just make sure, are these notices serving the purposes. Notices, so we sent outbound communications there. We offer the ability for customers to make certain types of service requests or inquiries into the organization rather than calling us. And so, I want to make sure that A, they have the right features available to them. Is there better options we could have for the types of requests they make of us? Are we sending out notices that are clear and concise and getting good customer feedback, or are they generating more calls for us, which I've seen a little bit of example of good and bad in those scenarios of what we have.

And really, just trying to, again, look at our data. What is the utilization? Where might those processes have an opportunity to be more effective for the customer where they're getting a concise answer more quickly than needing to call us. Again, having self-services, phone calls can be expensive if they're extended time and personnel and trying to make sure we're giving a good experience there. So we're using self-service for those customers who would like to, in the most effective way.

Prem:

And also, Steve, I just wanted to highlight as part of our strategic goal. I always go back to our strategic goal, as you can imagine. We do have a goal for 42% of our customer transactions, especially either billing, E-Bill and E-Pay. We now turned into 40%, which is almost a good population and which is way more than the industry standard. We do have a goal this year of 35% of that to be achieved. And we currently, I believe, are at 32.1%, so we constantly track that. Again, it's good business, and I hear other companies when they are being challenged, and like you said about they're going in circles. We don't have much of that. What we are trying to fine tune here, is to really serve them the way they want. So some customers, they want to come on IVR, make a payment and they're done. Some of them would want to talk to one of our CSRs. I think they're really catering their needs. We are trying to keep that balance, at the same time, achieve our goals. I just wanted to add that color.

Stephen:

Yeah.

Mark:

How many customers are 90 days past due, percentage wise?

Prem:

I would say, if you look, there is an AR report that we circulate, Mark. So past 60 days due, we have close to, I believe four million is the number. The total AR is around 19, but four million is what we have in terms of past 60 days.

Mark:

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No, no. I mean, that's how much money, but how many customers? We got a 100,000 customers. Is it 10%, 20%?

Dana:

I believe we're 38% past due.

Mark:

38%?

Michelle:

Yeah. The Steve, Mark, we don't have that number right available tonight. But I will say that the receivables, although they are still elevated from pre pandemic levels, they have been going down as far as the trend. So we are watching that carefully, but I just don't have the exact percent.

Prem:

Yeah. No, I think we can get back to you on that, Mark. We don't have the customer percent, we have the percent on the finance side, but we don't have the customer, so we can get back to you on that. We do have the information, we don't have it right now.

Mark:

Four million, is that high, low? What's that percent?

Michelle:

It is elevated from three pandemic levels. It definitely is still elevated. And we're working to get that down.

Prem:

That's right.

Naomi:

Dana, when you-

Stephen:

From the 35%?

Prem:

Sorry Steve, go ahead.

Stephen:

The 35% you were talking about, is that the number of calls you want to have resolved with a automated system? Is that what you talked?

Prem:

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No, it was not about the call, Steve. The 35% was the eBill, EPay target. So actually, we would like to have-

Stephen:

Oh, okay.

Prem:

Yeah. Yeah.

Stephen:

How many people participating. Okay.

Prem:

That's right. Yeah.

Rich:

Dana-

Naomi:

Can you hear me?

Stephen:

Yeah. Wait a minute. Naomi had a question as well.

Naomi:

Yeah.

Stephen:

Please go ahead, Naomi.

Naomi:

I have a question. Dana, when you stay up top with the collection strategy, and it says resume collection activities, are you talking inside or outside?

Dana:

Actually, I'm referring there to inside activities. I do want to share though that one of the opportunities we are looking at for the collection strategies, is the use of collection agencies. We do not have a formal plan for that right now that I can share with you, but I will share that we are looking at how to do that, and we'll be sharing that as we come up with a formal plan.

Naomi:

Okay. Thank you.

Dana:

Yeah.

Rich:

Dana, a question for you as Consumer Affairs, the telephony initiatives are probably one of the most important things we can discuss on these calls, because so much of our contact with consumers are through phone calls.

Dana:

Yes.

Rich:

And a couple things. I recently had an experience with the gas company, and it was horrible. To Steve's point, my gas had been turned off, but it had been paid. I tried to get a live person. I kept ending up in Western Union. And I mean, I'm a computer guy. I've been in project management and technology my whole career. And I'm never the smartest guy in the room, but I didn't deserve to... I was in this jail, and you get to the point where you just want to throw the phone across the room. And if I had a choice, I would've left the gas company. But what they did was, they do the survey, and I said I wasn't happy. And somebody called me back, and I respected that, and asked what my experience was.

I'm just sharing this as an example of what I recently went through. What I'm wondering is, what are our numbers. If you look at right now, our queuing strategies or any data you have in terms of customer sat on our voice response system, where do we see the problems? Because a lot of times these scripts are cryptic, they're not clear. Usually people are trying to gain these voice systems to get to a live person. You go on the internet, everybody's telling you, you'll press zero, press this if you want a live person. I'd love to have the group hear the prompts, maybe in one of our meetings, dial in and share the experience with the Consumer Affairs group.

Dana:

I think it would be a really interesting exercise. I can tell you that in the conversations I've had with Laura and subsequently with our telephony folks in Prem's shop, one of the key aspects we're looking at, is re-scripting. It is confusing. It's anecdotal information that I have. We actually do not survey the customers specifically about the IVR queuing, but any one of our CSRs will tell you that these are the fuss. Once a customer finally gets them, there is often a level of some challenge that they had with that. So we view that as a huge opportunity for us. And one of the reasons I've made this, one of my key things that I think strategically we need to look at both.

Again, if you've got a customer who's had a challenging experience with your phone system, just trying to get to a CSR, it actually adds time to our calls. It makes for a more tense discussion, and the CSR has to work harder to try to calm that customer down so that we can have a conversation about the real issue that they were calling for. So Rich, completely appreciate. And I think we've all had those IVR experiences where we're just ready to throw the phone. And I would welcome that. I think, I don't want to promise you when it's going to come just yet, but I would like to be able to get a better handle on that and be able to share with you a plan, maybe a pre and a post type of demonstration kind of a thing that perhaps we could look at doing, if that would be okay.

Prem:

I think, can I say something, Rich. That's a great perspective. It's the way that you want the customer to be served, the way they want to be served. So I think it's not more so everybody's just going to IVR. So there's a whole understanding of customer segmentation based on some customers would just want to pay a bill and they don't want to ever talk to anybody, and some of them want to have a conversation. So we are striving to get there. And I want to be careful, because the gas company example, I had some of them too. That's frustrating. I don't think we are at that point. And I think what Dana is talking about is the customer journey. When we talk about customer journey, for example, if a customer is calling in and they would like to talk to someone, how do we really relate that in terms of the topic they would like to talk, or is it billing related, et cetera, and get them to a live person, for example.

Or if the customer wants to look at, let's say, meter usage, for example, then how do we really take that journey to say that, okay, you could actually do it in water watch. So trying to help the customer for what they want. I wanted to highlight that. It's not more so of every customer is frustrated, it's more so of catering to their needs. So working through that journey and really mapping that journey. And what does it mean when they press one versus two versus three? That's what Dana's focused on.

And I think it's a long way to go, but like we said, things like customer satisfaction survey that we had launched, it's going to tell us a lot, a lot of intel on what are they experiencing. And this survey is actually right after their call. So it's not something we send after a year or something. It's not a yearly survey, this is a survey that goes right after the call, so you're going to hear directly from the customer. That's the good thing. I think those are the things that Dana's trying to put in place to help the customer.

Rich:

And am I to understand that the back room, the customer service representatives are that siloed, that we do need to differentiate the topic at the front end, because we have people that only do billing. Is that right? Or do our customer service reps, are they generalists? And do they any topic? And if so, why are we segregating in the front?

Prem:

No, I think-

Dana:

Yes, they-

Prem:

Can I answer that?

Dana:

Yeah.

Prem:

I think we got to be very careful, because all our customer reps are fully trained in everything. They are generalists, they are trained in depth. So it's not more so of whether one person knows, another person doesn't know it. It's more along the lines of what does a customer want to talk about? So is he, like I

said, press one for billing, or press five for pipe safe. So it's basically, getting them to the queue faster so we can focus on the conversation. But all of our customer reps are all trained. So I think it's not so much of that. It's more of, like you said, on how to really get to sell them quicker. That's the focus.

Rich:

Prem, help me understand why, and I don't mean to be slow on the uptake here, but how is it if everybody's trained on everything and somebody says pipe safe, they're going to be served faster than somebody that says billing, unless we are segregating on the back end in identifying people who are experts on pipes safe and they're free, and the billing people in our service department aren't. Why would one be served faster than another, as opposed to, first in first out?

Prem:

No, it is. Maybe I should course that, it is first in first out, Rich. What I'm trying to say is, for example, we have a three member crew on pipe safe who take care of specific to pipe safe, billing, et cetera, but they are trained with all the CSR activities, et cetera. So the way that we are looking at, is to balance the calls that are coming in. So it is when the first person calls, they're served first. That's the philosophy, but it is also very specific on the teams that are managing. It could be a specific question related to a field crew. So a conversation of that side would be a different conversation, compared to just a billing question. So it is a mixture of all the training. My point is, everybody's trained on everything, but based on the type of the calls, we try to route the calls, but it is being routed based on the queue, which is first in, first out. That's the way we do it.

And then there's also, for example, there may be peak times like a Monday. Mondays are usually a little higher volumes compared to other days, because people are coming back to work and it's a weekend. So what happens in that case is that when we look at the calls coming in, we manage the queues in a fashion where we can actually address these calls as they're coming. And we have actually looked at some of the things like the overflows. For example, if the customer's waiting for more than three minutes, or the call goes into Edwards, for example. So we do, do those things to make sure that we get to the customer quickly. It's not because we want to serve one customer faster than the other. It's more like, we want to get to all the customers as quick as possible. That's the idea.

Rich:

And just two more points. And I don't mean to tie us up, but I'm still not sure I got the point about why somebody would be, knowing that they're calling for pipe safe as opposed to billing, makes a difference, if we're not segregating the back end by expertise. If everybody can handle every call, then why... You said, if they say, give us pipe safe, we get to them faster.

Prem:

Yeah, I see where you're going with that. I mean, maybe this will answer your question. So while we have our unions, remember we do have specific roles. So the pipe safe team internally have a different role. They are pipe safe coordinators, et cetera. So there is that role specific thing. So we have, let's say for example, senior role versus a CSR role. Senior representative and the CSR role, we have supervisors. So based on the role, that calls also get diverted. So I think there is that. Maybe that's what you're looking for. So there is that.

Rich:

Yeah. So who gets the call, does depend. They're not generalists. We have subject matter experts in the customer service side that those calls are targeted to.

Prem:

Yeah. My point earlier was, I'm sorry, maybe I should have been clear. My point was, the CSRs are generalists. So the CSR roles are generalist roles, so everybody's trained equally. But then you do have a deviation of different roles, whether it's cashiers role, for example, or a senior role or a role with CSR. So it's based on the role. So while they're gen, at a time we have six to eight CSRs taking calls constantly. Those people are all trained at the same level, and then there's general level training. My point was about generalists in the same role. Hopefully that explains it.

Rich:

I think I got the spirit of it. Yes. Thank you.

Prem:

Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. That was a great question.

Stephen:

Dana or Prem, I have a question. A comment and a question. The organization I called like yourselves, had options for what was broken or the different functions that you have internally, but none of them was what I was calling for. And there was no option for me to let them know that I needed to talk to someone, or that those particular options didn't answer my issue. So, you need to get refocused to somewhere else.

Prem:

Yeah. This is the example, Steve, I think you're probably referring back to the same queuing system. And I know different companies do it in different ways, but what makes sense for the customer, we need to understand. And these surveys, that's why we do these surveys to get that feedback so we can re-que them properly. But I agree with you 100%.

Stephen:

Yeah. No, the customer service system is to serve the customer, not to just meet the needs of the organization internally.

Prem:

That's right.

Stephen:

You want to know that the customer always has a way to get to you. Or if frustration, they hang up and you've just created a problem for yourself in some other way.

Prem:

That's right. Absolutely. And I think that's a great point right there. And you'd see further in the presentation that we talk about things that we did last year. For example, we have a whole focus on customer escalations now, and I know Jeff appreciates it. Louise is our customer experience manager. She looks at it. So we are trying to help our customer at the end of the day, and how we can resolve. And believe me, I think the team takes a lot of pride. They do a fabulous job, and trying to get some of these issues resolved as quick as possible. So that's what differentiates us with other companies. The way I'm seeing it, we have a small group, but we do a fabulous job. Of course, there's always room for improvement, and that's what Dana's focused on, getting those improvements done. That's our focus. Yeah.

Rich:

One last point. I'm sorry, but I worked for AT&T and when I have problems internally and I have to call the help desk, I shudder, because it's a horrible experience, because AT&T looked to save money. We offshore a lot of this. We'd go to the lowest bidder. We never really quantify what the cost is to the business of having frustrated customers. And I wonder sometimes, is it cost effective to get people tied up in IVR, these would be, giving them a live person on every call. Have we ever crunched numbers? Do we really look at cost benefit? Have we looked at hard data about cost of customer support through phone calls to say, we want a queuing strategy. We want IVR as opposed to having customer service reps pick up the phone. In this day and age, I can't tell you how welcome that would be, and with most people I know. I got a lot of person.

Prem:

Yeah. Yeah. And I think that's a great point, Rich. And I think the key is also, we call customer segmentation. We talked about our population recognizing our demographics on what customers do we have, and what do they like to be served with? I think we got to think from that angle, a lot of companies don't do that. They're thinking about their financial numbers and crunching, and that's why they have problems. I've seen this again and again, but we are trying to do all the right things to make sure that if we have a customer waiting, the call needs to be answered. And more so in terms of making sure we are serving them the way that their issues, whether it could be billing, whatever it is, we serve them the way they want. So we are looking at that, but that's a great point right there.

Greater New Haven, we all know our population. We had to make sure we cater that. COVID had that actually put a different spin on. And we have been seeing a good uptake. It talked about E-Bill, E-Pay. We have a big percentage of our customers who are E-Bill, E-Pay customers. So those just seamlessly go through and we don't get involved. And mostly, if a customer has an issue with a meter or something like that, that's when we have more conversations, and then some billing gratification, things like that sort. It is a pattern, and we will share with the authority as well as RPB in terms of our, this year after monthly billing, I know we went from quarterly to monthly, we are collecting statistics. There will be a discussion, not today, to just talk about how well we have been doing, and what's the progress. More to come on that, but those are some good comments, Rich.

Stephen:

I promise to, Steve again, just a couple more comments. I always consider the first person that someone encounters in a company is the most important, because that's their impression of the company. And if it's an automated system, that has to be an effective system to create the same impression. And the other thing that occurred to me is, with these automated systems, you're not really feeling out that

person or having an opportunity to maybe direct them to another service or sell them one of your other services, which you're interested in doing.

Prem:

Yeah. I think that's a good commentary. I always give this example, the simplest example, we went from quarterly to monthly. You went from four bills to now 12 bills. We went from four payments to 12 payments, but we did not increase our workforce, because we are efficiently looking at doing things better. So our volumes, while they're going higher, we are able to operate in a fashion where we are serving our customer. So that right there is a strategy. So we are trying to contain our cost, at the same time serving the customer as they wanted to be served.

So when I talk about this 42% E-Bill or whatever the numbers are, those numbers, as we're driving more self-service, because the whole industry is going that way, our goal is to still manage within our cost constrain on our budget, and really do what's right for the customer. That's the balance. Every company has to think that way. We are striving to do that. And to your point, we have really figured that out. It's not a perfect science, but eventually, as we do all of these different tools like surveys and other things, we are getting the feedback to readjust ourselves, because things are changing every other day. So yeah, it is crazy.

Stephen:

Okay.

Naomi:

I have one last question. What is the approximate time it takes for someone to call in and press this button, that button and whatever, and get a live person thereafter?

Dana:

Our average... Oh, go ahead, Prem.

Prem:

No, go ahead. I think that's the average speed of answer. I don't know if that's where you're going with it. So it just could... Go ahead.

Dana:

Well, actually, average speed of answer is one look at that. And really, right now we're averaging just over a minute, about a minute and a half, depends on our day, about a minute and a half. But I think what you're actually asking, I think, comes before we measure that average speed of answer. So the average speed of answer is once they've made that selection, and they're waiting for a CSR to actually pick up the phone. I think it depends on what the customer picks, but Naomi, I honestly don't have an average number for that. We could run through a couple of the scripts like Rich suggested, and take a look at what that is. It's really just a one button option. Essentially, if you say billing, then we ask for your account number, and then you're in the queue.

So it really just depends on how the customer would select that, but it is designed to be a very quick exercise, but I do think, again, we've all encountered those challenges. Maybe we enter the account number wrong and the system doesn't recognize it, you have to do it again. So there could be some of

that happening, but again, back to making that automated system as user friendly as possible, is something that's again, where I'm trying to focus and make sure that we're using these tools in the right way, needing the customers where they want to be. And if they don't want to use those tools, how do we get them to a CSR as quickly as possible?

Naomi:

Because I know I have experienced that. You've called into companies and you push one button, and then at some point it tells you, you're caller number whatever, or it's a 30 minute wait or whatever. Is our system like that?

Prem:

No. No.

Dana:

It doesn't get quite that precise. And I'll also share that one of the opportunities I had was in reviewing some of the messages that we do play when a customer calls us. We removed a couple of them that were not quite appropriate. Sometimes we were saying there was a wait, when really I had CSRs waiting to take your call, literally available and you would talk to them, but we would say, we are experiencing some call volume and you may have to wait. It was more precautionary, but unnecessary, and I think was causing some of our abandonments that were, again, unnecessary at that point. So I do appreciate the perspective you're sharing. I think there's a time and a place for those messages. And that is again, back to the queuing strategies, some of the things that I'm looking at to make sure that we're doing that appropriately, sharing messages appropriately, giving them options appropriately.

Mark:

How many calls a day do we get?

Dana:

Anywhere from about 250 to 280 a day?

Mark:

Okay. Most of those are about billing and pipes a day?

Dana:

Mostly, yes. Mostly about billing. And actually... I'm sorry. That actually doesn't count the pipe safe calls. Those are actually managed, again, those three CSRs that handle that separately, are managed by John Cusack and the pipe safe folks. So my number is purely-

Mark:

How many calls come in for pipe a day.

Dana:

Sorry?

Mark:

How many calls come in a day for pipe safety? You need three people on it.

Prem:

I would say probably around 70 calls, Mark, on average. Some days are pretty high, but somewhere along those lines, I would say. And then remember, they're not just CSRs, they're also doing billing.

Mark:

Oh, they are doing billings, but the call would go to them if it was a pipe safe call.

Prem:

That's right. That's right. And again, just to give an appreciation, to Naomi your question. An average best industry standard, if you will, ranges they say for utilities especially, it's 110 seconds to 180 seconds in terms of the best average speed of answer. Our goal is 75 seconds. So to Dana's point, we get an appreciation right there, because we feel that we have tightened our goals to get the best to the customer. And then, we are further fine tuning that. So if you compare what we have versus what's out there, we are best in class, to be honest. And compared to what Gartner and anybody else is out there. So I just want to give a perspective for appreciation, because I think we do a decent job for the size we are.

Naomi:

Okay.

Rich:

And I sure want to let you get to the second slide, but just a quick question, you mentioned abandonment, you have key metrics that you've captured for existing customer experiences that you're going to set goals, and maybe they're in the slide deck.

Prem:

Yes.

Dana:

Yeah. Actually, we do have goals around abandonment, average speed of answer. Those are, I'll call them the standard metrics we typically are sharing with the board and the various committees, so that is a standard metric. Our target is 5% or less for abandoned calls. And we had some challenges over the summer, but really we've seen a huge improvement in August and so far in September, I'm hoping that will continue. Again, I think creating the right messaging for some of those customers has helped with that. If you hear there's a lot of calls and you may have a long wait, you're just going to hang up. Some customers may just hang up. So I think by improving those messaging, I've been able to positively influence that metric over the last month or so, and more to come certainly on that.

I'm also, from an abandonment perspective, part of the analytics looking at, at what point in the wait time are customers hanging up. Is it within the first five seconds, 10 seconds? Do they wait for two and a half minutes, and then hang up. Those don't happen very often. Just illustrating the timeline. And those

are really, again, opportunities for a look at how to best handle what's happening to the customer. What that journey looks like, where the customer tolerance levels are so I can make sure we're staffed appropriately. And again, that we're playing them the right types of messages that they need to hear while they're waiting back there.

Rich:

That's great granularity to be looking at. I'd love to see those metrics sometime, maybe on one of these calls. See what they-

Dana:

Sure. Would be a great opportunity to dive. Yeah.

Tony:

Hey Jeff, are any of these 250 calls roughly a day, are any of them reaching your desk at all?

Jeff:

No.

Tony:

Okay.

Prem:

Dana, what was that? It was 250 to something per day.

Dana:

Yeah. About 250 to 280 is what I'm seeing on an average right now. Again, I've just over in the last six to eight weeks started really watching the queue daily, as opposed to previously. So seasonally, it might change a little bit, but that's what I'm seeing right now.

Mark:

I wonder what slide five looks like.

Prem:

Let's go. I love the conversation. I love this, because this is the full transparency and on you guys know, and anything that we can take as feedback from here, is absolutely fabulous. Yeah.

Dana:

Yeah. What I'm sharing with you here is the customer escalations dashboard. These are the customers that are reaching out to RWA, either through what I will call escalated channels. So they're coming from the OCA or RPB members. You can see here, leadership team members of RWA, escalated directly to Louise, our customer care manager or through a town official. So we're really trying to understand where some of these concerns that customers are raising, and making sure that we're resolving them promptly. Here you can see the snapshot of what we had at the end of August. We had eight complaints

escalated through these channels. Through the fiscal year, seven had been closed. We still had one that had been pending through an RPB member.

And again, just were really targeting, trying to close them within five days. And we've been successful at 71.4%. At the time doing that, our average time to close is 6.6 days. And this is, again, a variety of activities that happen each time these customers come through these channels, we're analyzing the account. We're interacting typically with the source of the escalation, as well as the customer themselves, coordinating with our departments to make sure that we have all the information, and are circling back with the customers to come to resolution. So just wanted to share this as a-

Mark:

That's a great graph. That's a great graph.

Prem:

Thank you, Mark.

Dana:

And if we go to the next slide, I also wanted to take a minute to let you know that we really do get some positive feedback from our customers too. This is a slide we'd actually shared with the customer care team at a recent town hall. A couple examples, just to share with you around reps that have received feedback, things like, she was so helpful and professional, how they expressed some of the challenges they're going through with medical problems and the kindness that the reps have shown through to them. Larry actually had received a compliment from a person at a event he had gone to, saying that our reps are good, caring, patient, well informed.

I just being new to the block in this role, I just wanted to take a minute to let you know, you hear about a lot of the challenges that we have. And when you have 120,000 customers and we're talking to them every day, there are opportunities where we can improve, but there really are just as many of these situations where our customers are truly appreciative of the work that our CSRs are putting forward. And I'll also use this as a small plug for the upcoming customer service week, which is the week of October 3rd. And it's just going to be an opportunity where RWA will show some appreciation for a lot of those frontline workers, whether they be phone reps, field service workers, trying to recognize this effort they put forward every day to be the best they can be for those customers, even in challenging situations. Just wanted to share some positive influences.

Tony:

That's good to hear.

Mark:

Do we give any, somebody gets 15 ya-ha's in a three month period, do they get prize?

Dana:

I'm going to start a Ya-ha Award. I like that.

Mark:

A gift certificate or something like that.

Dana:

We do. We actually have, they're called Stars Awards. And each year we recognize the RWA team member, regardless of what department they live in. They get recognized for those who get the most stars awards. Yes.

Mark:

Cool.

Prem:

Yeah. And I think the customer service week, Mark, is more of in terms of appreciation, we do a little raffle, if you will, and then we bring in donuts for our team, and things that matter for that week. So I think we do a good job. I think team appreciates that. I think this week is going to be an interesting one, and we are working through, because as you know, COVID had changed and everything's differently, but we are keeping a nice balance and appreciating our employees.

Mark:

No steak sandwiches, just donuts?

Dana:

We're all about the carbs and sugar. I don't know. I just include in this slide as well, what I just wanted also to let you know, that we do a lot to share these kudos amongst the team members themselves. These are examples of emails that go out from the supervisors to the customer care reps. It's a great opportunity to recognize each other amongst our peers, as well as use them as little mini training opportunities. These are things that go well and that customers appreciate. And hopefully, these messages resonate amongst our team members. So I've enjoyed these. Again, I did not introduce this. This is something that these team members have been doing for a while, but I've always loved the fun aspect nature of it that they bring, like fun emojis, different things that call attention to it. So again, just trying to share some of the good things going on.

Mark:

Well, just to say, if they don't enjoy coming to work, it'll show in the work.

Dana:

Yes, that's it. Thank you. We can go to the next slide. These are a couple of non-traditional metrics, I guess I'll say. And I really wanted to try to call them indicators and not metrics, because we don't necessarily have targets for a lot of these things, but these are some of the different aspects of the business that I have started to look at. Don't have targets to share with you, just really wanted to give you a sense of how I'm getting a handle on the types of work, the volumes we're handling, and how this influences. We're doing more than answering calls. We're actually doing a lot of back office work. So I just wanted to point out that so far for the fiscal year, we've handled over 18,000 calls. We've sent out over 355,000 invoices. You can see we're at 32% of customers on paperless or E-Billing.

Our 60 day receivables is 4.1 as Prem mentioned earlier. This net past-due accounts, I am regretting that I worded it this way based on the question earlier, but this is actually 38%, and let me just make sure I use the proper wording, let me go there, is the net past-due accounts, excluding family tenants, properties that are in receivership or that we've replaced lien. So it's not a number of accounts. It would've been less confusing probably if we hadn't had the conversation we had earlier. Sorry. That's coming out of the receivables report.

Michelle:

Yeah. I'll just add, it's the percent that's addressable, is what that metric is about.

Dana:

Yes. Thank you, Michelle. When we exclude those things like multi tenants, receiverships and liens, this is the percent of receivables we can still take action on. Thank you.

Prem:

Yeah.

Dana:

And again, we've processed over 2000 property closings each month. This is the transition to new property owners as well as the final statements. And I was very excited to see that even this late in the year, our recreation permits all handled by my department, we've done almost 900 of those so far this year, and still looking at a very active September season so far. And I think with that, if there's no questions...

Prem:

You're good. Any questions from our members here?

Stephen:

No, good job Dana. It turned out to be a good topic for Consumer Affairs, and I appreciate the update. Thank you.

Dana:

Thank you.

Stephen:

Okay. If we don't have any questions, we can move on. Item four is a report of the OCA. Jeff?

Jeff:

I'm anti climatic here. I spent a lot of time as you know, on the CIS application, and you know why I spent a lot of time on it. It's an unusual application. It's an important project. And it's really the second bite at the apple for a lot of us with this type of a significant project, even though the current management team wasn't in place in 2008, when that legacy COBOL system was replaced with the SAP system. Tony and Steve and Mark were certainly around for that, and as was I. So I spent what I thought

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was appropriate amount of time on it, and gave you a memo and some presentation that gave you the OCAs process for thinking about the necessity and appropriateness of spending \$15 million on an upgraded new customer information system. I don't have any-

Mark:

You're not anti climatic at a \$15,000 bill.

Jeff:

Well, 10 of the 15,000 is not me.

Mark:

I'm just saying you're not anti climatic.

Jeff:

No consumer complaints per se. Some of you know that there was a meeting of the City of New Haven's Environmental Advisory Council on September 7th, it was a remote meeting. I was in attendance. Steve Mongillo was in attendance. Catherine Lamar was in attendance. Naomi Campbell was in attendance, and Steve Vitko, who's a Senior Environmental Analyst for the Water Authority, was in attendance. And I didn't really know going into this. This was the second meeting of the council that I was invited to and attended. The first one was pre COVID and was in-person in city hall three years ago. My understanding from the communications that were shared with me by Steve Vico and the authority, and Sonny prior to the meeting was, there were questions about a 15 second public service announcement that the authority aired on, I guess, WTNHTV concerning or encouraging the use of leaf blowers in lieu of garden hoses to clear sidewalks.

The Environmental Advisory Council was very agitated and very concerned because of the health issues that are raised by gas powered leaf blowers. So my understanding was that there were some questions about that, and why the authority aired that PSA, and why the authority waited so long to pull it off. But the bigger issue, quite frankly, really at the meeting, had to do with the rate structure, with the authority's rate structure and some very strong beliefs by members of the Environmental Advisory Council that the authority should take a deep look into conservation oriented rate structures, and the particular concern that the council seems to have pertains to Yale University's irrigation of synthetic turf fields.

So I think we all did the best we could to answer questions that we didn't know would be asked. We've got some additional follow up that we'll do to provide more specific information from the authority's cost of service study and rate studies that have been done, quite frankly, on a more frequent basis over the last 10 years than in the history of the Water Authority, is my understanding from being an OCA for the last 14 years. So I think we provided a good explanation to the best of our ability without having at our fingertips, all of the data that goes into a cost of service study, but really, as the OCA, my focus, whenever there's been a rate application and whenever there's been a cost of service study, has been on equity. And equity means, in my mind at least, endeavoring to charge customers for the service, the cost of providing this specific service that they receive, and customers that use more water, don't necessarily cost more money to serve.

There are infrastructure costs, there are O&M costs associated with water service that everyone involved with the Regional Water Authority, whether it be as an employee, as an RPB member, as a

member of the five-member authority, or the OCA, are all too familiar with, from the rate applications, with the exception of the peak time in COVID, have been coming every 18 months. And with the annual budgeting process that we all participate in at the consumer affairs, land use and finance committee levels. So we understand what those costs are. We also understand that the Regional water authority is in somewhat of a unique position. We have a significant amount of capacity. And my view is that we should endeavor to sell as much water as we can, as long as we maintain safe inventory levels. So conservation is important, but water sales are important also, because if the idea is that we're not going to sell water, then that's just going to result in more rate increases, because we have infrastructure costs that aren't going away.

We have L&M costs that aren't going away. And the authority for the last few years has been working very hard, trying to explore profitable non-core revenue opportunities. And so, if the idea is that we're not going to worry about rates, and we're going to try to sell less water, then as a consumer advocate, I have a real big problem with that, because I have to balance the conservation mission with affordability of water. And the whole 14 years that I've been OCA, the New Haven region has been in either a recession or trying to recover from a recession. And we're always concerned about rate increases and making water affordable for the consumer. And at the same time, we understand that as the owner of approximately 26,000 acres, Regional Water Authorities and environmental steward as well.

So balancing those interests is very important to me. I know it's very important to all of you, and I think we need to have a little bit of a discussion, the FMA, the RPB, Consumer Affairs Committee, about whether we need to better communicate with the Environmental Advisory Council and what form of communication would be appropriate, or whether you're even concerned about it or not. That's a summary of what transpired on the seventh. Like I said, there's one, two, three, four other people that were there besides me, and three of them are on this meeting. So maybe they can weigh in as well.

Stephen:

Jeff, I just want to speak to a couple of points that you made, and I'm glad Naomi and Catherine are on the call, because they were there, and if I don't present this correctly, they can chime in. I originally joined the meeting just to hear what the issues were. I didn't know what they were concerned about. I had no intention of speaking, and what I encountered was a very negative tone toward the water company, and poor Steve Vico got basically attacked, not just on the leaf blowers, but on some other issues. And we all ended up providing some information, because I think a lot of their feelings were dependent upon misinformation. So some of it we were able to supply, but I think that the remainder needs to be supplied on the rate structure by the authority. And Catherine was going to take that back to the authority to discuss and decide how to do that.

So as far as Consumer Affairs is concerned, I'm more than willing to hold till Catherine deals with this and decides how to address it. But I do think it's worth responding to, because of the false impressions that they had. And one of them being, water is dynamic. They seem to think that we could save this forever for the future. We process it, it has a shelf life. We did make this point about creating a balance. And I think the real answer to them is, this whole thing in the balance is the question of, if we don't sell to those customers, your bill's going to increase. Are you okay with that? And just understanding how this was thought out in very careful ways, and is a plan that came out of a lot of consideration for how to structure these rates. So my that's my cents. Catherine and Naomi, if you'd like to chime in, please do.

Mark:

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Excuse me. This is Mark. I got to leave this meeting. Sorry, but I got to leave early. I have an appointment. Thank you very much. I'll see you guys later.

Tony:

Hey, do we need his vote?

Stephen:

No, we have other people.

Tony:

Okay.

Catherine:

All right. Thanks, Steve. And I would like to say that I thought that Jeff, in fact, frankly everybody, whether RPB or OCA, the staff members from the RWA, I think answered the questions of this body as best as possible, given the fact that none of us were prepared or had any while there's this storm coming through. Interesting. But I do think that we need to figure out we, as in the RWA, need to figure out how to better inform the population, whether it's in the City of New Haven, but also in the region. This is not the first time I heard the statement, the RWA is not regulated. That's just not true. It was a lack of understanding of the regulatory process, lack of understanding of the rate making process.

And a lot of assumptions were made that were just plain inaccurate. And Jeff, I sent you a note saying, I thanking you and thought you did a great job of answering the questions and really appreciated that. But I would agree with Steve's view that it was very negative. There wasn't an interest of having a conversation. I felt an under attack. And I think all of us did. It was unfortunate, but I do think we need to figure out how to communicate and make sure that all in our region understand our regulatory structure. PURA is not the only regulatory body in the state.

Rochelle:

We are planning on having a further discussion, including at the authority meeting.

Catherine:

I think that's a great idea. Thanks, Rochelle.

Naomi:

And me being with New Haven, I felt like we were under attack also. And I think my impression is that they feel that we at the water company could regulate Yale. I mean, that's the whole bottom line. They want us to tell Yale how to use their water that they're paying for. And I think they're under the assumption that Yale is given a discount per se, and which they feel is totally unfair to the population of the City of New Haven. And I think they just took that with all their people that were on the board, and people, I guess, they must have invited in. I mean, because everybody was like an authority or our previous water company employee somewhere else in other states. I mean, they really just was like they were out to get us. That's just the way I took it.

And they came ready for a fight. And like I said, I think Jeff did a wonderful job. I think the other person, I can't remember his name, I don't have my notes with me, did a wonderful job trying to explain everything and the things that everybody was able to answer. And I think, going forward, that if something like this happens, I'm not sure whether it will again, but that we just maybe be more prepared. I guess, maybe get something, I mean the woman gave me this, she called me at work. This is how the whole thing started, and requesting that I come to this meeting and things. And like I said, I promised her if we have any public hearing, she said they never hear about those things, we should inform them personally, I guess, per se, that we're having public hearing so they could chime in if they want.

So this is what I, going forward. And also, Prem, is there any way you could get me any information going forward about these new apartments that are coming into the city? They're under the assumption that the water company is going to be making so much money now since all these new apartments are in. I know. They just feel that we are just going to be running over now with money, because of the fact that all these new buildings with all 500 here, 600 whatever, they feel we're just going to be rolling in the dough.

Prem:

Yeah. I think what we can do, Naomi, I can share in terms of, we have new construction, new services group. So we do know what kind of a license we have. They're pulled in to do some of these new services. So we do have that data, so we can share. But it is not true, like you're saying, it is not true that we will make this money.

Michelle:

We may actually want to go into executive session to have further conversation.

Naomi:

Okay.

Prem:

That's right. Yeah.

Naomi:

Okay.

Stephen:

I would guess that maybe Yale overall is using less water, because a lot of organizations have looked at ways to conserve, because of the cost in it. I don't know if that information's available.

Speaker 11:

Steve, they have a stated goal a few years ago that they were going to reduce water consumption by 5% a year, every year going forward. And this has been several years ago where they made that a goal.

Stephen:

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Yeah. I mean, I didn't have that fact at my fingertips, but it also wasn't appropriate for me to be saying that. So that's why I think someone from the water authority needs to respond with that kind of information.

Prem:

Yeah.

Tony:

I move. We approve Jeff's bill.

Stephen:

If we're done with this, Jeff, that's your report.

Jeff:

That's my report.

Stephen:

We appreciate.

Naomi:

I second it.

Stephen:

Thank you. Thanks for bringing that up too.

Jeff:

Sure.

Stephen:

And explaining it in detail. Item five on the agenda is Jeff's invoice, which he already noted, includes the cost for the consultant on the CIS project. So do I have a motion to approve that invoice for \$15,682.50?

Tony:

So moved.

Stephen:

Thank you. A second?

Naomi:

Second.

Stephen:

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Thanks, Naomi. All those in favor?

Tony:

Aye.

Stephen:

Aye.

Naomi:

Aye.

Stephen:

Any opposed, and abstentions? That carries unanimously. Item six is the authority meeting for September, which will be attended by Tony Rescigno. Correct, Tony?

Tony:

I will be there.

Stephen:

Okay, great.

Tony:

Or at least on the line.

Stephen:

Okay. And I think probably we should have thought of this earlier, but it'd be nice for you to having attended that at the next RPB meeting, to just maybe state a couple of things from that meeting that may be of interest to the committee.

Tony:

All right. Happy to do that.

Stephen:

Okay, thanks. Item seven, our next meeting is on October 17th at 5:30. Is there any new business? Item eight. Hearing none. I'll entertain a motion to adjourn.

Tony:

So moved.

Stephen:

Thanks, Tony. Second?

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Naomi:

Second.

Stephen:

Naomi. All those in favor?

Group:

Aye.