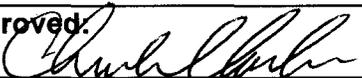


# Seattle Public Utilities - Policy & Procedure

<b>Subject:</b>  <b>CUSTOMER BILLING AND SERVICE DISPUTES WITHIN THE CUSTOMER SERVICE BRANCH - RETAIL</b>		<b>Number:</b> SPU-CS-104
		<b>Effective:</b> 11/1/05
		<b>Supersedes:</b> Appeals Section, Seattle Water Dept Policy & Procedure 400P-25-02, Credit & Collections
<b>Approved:</b> 	<b>Date:</b> 11/14/05	<b>Page(s):</b> 1 of 5

## 1.0 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To establish a uniform policy and procedure for the initiation and consideration of, and response to, retail customer billing and service disputes managed within the Customer Service Branch.

## 2.0 ORGANIZATIONS AFFECTED

- 2.1 Seattle Public Utilities

## 3.0 AUTHORITY

- 3.1 This policy functions within the general framework and authority accorded the Director of Seattle Public Utilities.

## 4.0 GENERAL POLICY

- 4.1 A customer's billing or service dispute will be given fair and timely consideration and response by the utility.
- 4.2 A response by the utility at any step in the process is considered final unless the utility is timely notified of a customer's continued dissatisfaction.
- 4.3 Normally a decision by the utility's Hearing Officer is considered final and is not subject to reconsideration.
- 4.4 The Director of Seattle Public Utilities has the ultimate review authority for any customer dispute.
- 4.5 The customer billing and service dispute process is not a litigation process. The laws and regulations that govern the operation of the utility are not subject to dispute under this policy.

## **5.0 RESPONSIBILITIES**

- 5.1 It is the customer's responsibility to cooperate in good faith with the requirements outlined in this policy and procedure.
  - 5.1.1 Disputes are to be initiated in a timely manner
  - 5.1.2 Disputes are to be initiated in accordance with the procedures outlined in this policy.
- 5.2 It is the responsibility of the Customer Service Branch to administer the policy and procedure in good faith.
  - 5.2.1 Provide written and verbal explanations of the policy and procedure to customers.
  - 5.2.2 Integrate the policy and procedure into basic customer service training.
  - 5.2.3 Timely acknowledge disputes, assist and direct customers through the dispute process, making appropriate referrals and noting account records.
  - 5.2.4 Provide a customer with a reasonable timeframe for resolution and response to their dispute

## **6.0 PROCEDURES**

- 6.1 **Progressive Dispute Resolution Process.** Seattle Public Utilities has a progressive dispute resolution process consisting of the following steps: Appendix 8.1 to this policy describes each step in detail.
  - 6.1.1 Step 1. Initial Conference/Review.
  - 6.1.2 Step 2. Supervisor's Review.
  - 6.1.3 Step 3. Manager's Review
  - 6.1.4 Step 4. Hearing Officer Review
- 6.2 **Dispute Description.**
  - 6.2.1 When initiating a dispute, a customer must clearly state the nature of the dispute, the amount or action being disputed, why it is being disputed, and what corrective action is being sought.
- 6.3 **Written Disputes.**
  - 6.3.1 Except for disputes being reviewed by the Hearing Officer, there is no requirement that disputes be made in writing. However, customers who are requesting a billing adjustment for higher than expected water consumption must comply with the requirements of the utility's leak rebate policy and may be required to submit their request in writing.
  - 6.3.2 Disputes may be submitted in writing at any step in the dispute process.
  - 6.3.3 Any written dispute received by Seattle Public Utilities will be timely acknowledged, reviewed and responded to.

## **6.4 Timeframe for Initiating a Dispute.**

- 6.4.1** Disputes need to be initiated in a timely manner following receipt of a bill that contains disputed charges, or upon notification of a pending utility action or other service matter that a customer is disputing.
- 6.4.2** Customers who disagree with the utility's response to a dispute at any step in the dispute process must take their dissatisfaction to the next step within 15 days of the date of the utility's response.

## **6.5 Timeframe for Seattle Public Utilities' Response to a Dispute.**

### **6.5.1 Initial Conference/Review, Supervisor's Review or Manager's Review.**

- 6.5.1.1** Seattle Public Utilities will make every effort to respond to the customer's dispute during the Initial Conference/Review, Supervisor's Review or Manager's Review.
- 6.5.1.2** If an immediate response is not possible, the employee handling the initial contact will provide the customer with their name and telephone number, and a timeframe for when the employee expects to respond to the customer. If the customer will be referred to another employee or work unit for response, 6.5.2 of this policy applies.
- 6.5.1.3** All customer disputes and utility actions and responses will be timely noted on the customer's account record.

### **6.5.2 Referrals.**

- 6.5.2.1** In the event a customer is referred to another employee or work unit at any step in the dispute process, the customer will be provided with the name of the work unit or employee and a contact telephone number.
- 6.5.2.2** Every effort will be made to directly hand-off the customer to the work unit or employee to whom the customer is being referred.
- 6.5.2.3** Any employee making a referral will confirm that the hand-off has been successful.
- 6.5.2.4** The employee accepting the hand-off will acknowledge the customer's dispute and provide the customer with an expected timeframe for response.
- 6.5.2.5** All customer referrals at any step of the process, and subsequent responses, will be noted on the customer's account record.
- 6.5.2.6** Normally a customer dispute will not be referred to the Hearing Officer prior to review and response at Step 2.

### **6.5.3 Hearing Officer Review.**

- 6.5.3.1** A customer who remains dissatisfied with responses to their dispute at Step 1, 2 or 3 in the dispute process may elect to have their dispute reviewed by the Hearing Officer for Seattle Public Utilities.
- 6.5.3.2** Disputes to the Hearing Officer are to be submitted in writing, unless the Hearing Officer agrees to waive this requirement due to exceptional circumstances.
- 6.5.3.3** Written disputes received by the Hearing Officer that have not been reviewed or responded to at an earlier step in the dispute process may be referred to the appropriate work unit for review and response, at the discretion of the Hearing Officer.
- 6.5.3.4** The Hearing Officer will timely acknowledge any written dispute, provide an explanation of next steps, identify who will be responding to the dispute if the dispute has been referred to another work unit, and provide an expected timeframe for response.
- 6.5.3.5** A review by the Hearing Officer may include an in-person meeting with a customer, but none is required.
- 6.5.3.6** Normally any response by the Hearing Officer will be in writing.

## **6.6 Payment of Charges.**

### **6.6.1 Disputed and Undisputed Charges.**

- 6.6.1.1** A combined utility account customer who initiates a billing and service dispute must identify the specific charges appearing on their bill that they dispute and for which they are withholding payment or seeking reimbursement.
- 6.6.1.2** All undisputed charges must be paid prior to initiating a dispute or at the time the dispute is initiated, but no later than the due date for the undisputed charges.

## **6.7 Credit and Collection Actions.**

### **6.7.1 Deferral of Credit and Collection Actions.**

- 6.7.1.1** Seattle Public Utilities will agree to temporarily suspend normal credit and collection actions when a customer has initiated a dispute in accordance with this policy and has paid all undisputed charges.
- 6.7.1.2** Credit and collection actions will remain suspended until Seattle Public Utilities has responded to the customer's dispute in accordance with this policy.

## **6.7.2 Re-commencement of Credit and Collection Actions.**

**6.7.2.1** Following Seattle Public Utilities' response to a customer's dispute at any step in the process, any charges covered by a dispute that has been denied are subject to normal credit and collection action, provided the customer does not timely communicate their continued dissatisfaction with the utility's response in accordance with this policy.

**6.7.2.2** Once Seattle Public Utilities has re-commenced credit and collection action for payment of charges that were covered by a dispute that was denied, it is under no obligation to further suspend any pending credit and collection action unless it can be determined that the customer made a good faith effort to pursue their dissatisfaction in accordance with this policy.

## **7.0 APPENDIX**

**7.1** Customer Billing and Service Dispute Process Within the Customer Service Branch

**7.2** Office Procedures – Hearing Officer/Appeals Coordinator, SPU