

APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 2, 2017.** Please include this application form with electronic entry.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County:		
Program Title:	 	
Program Category:		

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name:		
Title:		
Complete Mailing Address:		
Telephone:	Website:	
Email:		

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

Name:	
Title:	
Signature:	

Virginia Association of Counties - 2017 Achievement Award

Locality: Chesterfield County

Department: Chesterfield County Department of Utilities – Customer Operations Submitted by: Elizabeth A. Brooks, Customer Operations Administrator Category: Community & Economic Development

Embracing a New Notification Process and Promoting Positive Customer Service

Background Information of the Program:

On March 11, 2016, the General Assembly of Virginia passed a law updating State Code Section 15.2-2119 effective July 1, 2016. According to this law, utility agencies must give written notices to customers prior to disconnection. This revised law was presented in the House of Delegates as House Bill 919 (HB-919). This program is a significant change to our disconnection process. Before this law, customers did not have to be notified prior to their services being disconnected. To adhere to the new disconnection process for notifying delinquent customers concerning their past-due account, to provide exceptional customer service regarding payment of their bill, to help customers avoid disconnection and to enhance employee understanding of the new collection process, we needed to understand the implementation of HB-919 to become successful. We needed to thoroughly comprehend how we are going to make it work for everyone involved. HB-919 required us to implement a new notification and collection schedule to ensure we are meeting the requirements of the General Assembly and being effective.

We had to overhaul our current disconnection process and implement a new disconnection process with notifications prior to disconnection of customers. To implement the HB-919 disconnection process, we made changes to our notifications, collections schedules, the wording presented on bills, and timing of when to hang courtesy and disconnect notices to our customers. First, we developed a procedure that incorporated the requirements of HB-919, revised and updated our notification process, updated our Courtesy Notification and Disconnection Notice

programs, enhanced our "Blue Bill" (customers first bill) to add content of the wording "notice," and implemented a service level plan to maintain customer satisfaction. Second, we trained our employees to have a better understanding of what we were doing and the reasons why we are changing our processes. We did scripting of what to say to our customers when they called and asked why they were being disconnected when they just received a bill. We brainstormed ideas to make the new program work and implemented new scripting when discussing accounts with our customers. Utilities can't disconnect anyone until they are 60 days past due and given four notices of the delinquency from the original bill with utilities notifying the customer in writing 10 business days prior to disconnection.

Challenge and Need of the Program:

On February 26, 2016, the Utilities Department received notification that the House of Delegates of the Virginia General Assembly would pass a bill that will require water/wastewater utilities to notify customers before they are disconnected. The bill was signed by the Governor on March 11, 2016, with an effective date of July 1, 2016. For all tasks to be addressed and completed without a duplication of effort, a Performance Action Team, or P.A.T., which consisted of managers, supervisors, and information technology personnel. was created and brainstormed on how to carry out the changes required to make the new notification program successful. We began by looking at and addressing issues pertaining to the timeframe that these processes require for notifications to customers. We needed to make changes to how we notify our customers and still use the courtesy notification program that we currently have in place. The additional notifications that the program requires had to also be implemented. There were many modifications to our current processes that needed to be changed. It required enhancements and modifications to the bill format and content of our existing water and wastewater bi-monthly utility bills, changes to the dates when we can notify customers, time constraints of the notifications, and changes in the wording of the courtesy and disconnection notifications. The P.A.T. addressed the issues pertaining to the changes of this approved bill that would change our business practices drastically.

The main scope of the team was to address all customer service levels and see how we can follow the requirements specifically stated by the Virginia General Assembly to give the customers more notifications regarding their bill before disconnection of service. Because of the

expansion in time, customers will have the tendency to forget about paying the bill until they receive another new bill. The objectives of the group were to make sure that the new process of notifications minimizes the chances of mistaken dates for disconnections, that our billing Customer Information System, or CIS, can accommodate the new changes of dates for courtesy notifications and disconnections, changes to our billing calendar, giving our customer service representatives the ability to explain to the customer the changes and making sure that all unpaid accounts are reviewed and disconnected on schedule. The team also contacted other utilities to identify the changes they made for their notification practices and vice versa. Our goal was to make sure that our employees understood and we implemented the notification changes successfully.

First, we began working on the changes to the billing calendar on March 11, 2016, once we heard that the law had passed. We reviewed and revised our existing billing calendar to include all the dates of notifications. We identified the billing cycle for starting the new notification process, the billing cycle that the modification of the bill begins, the conversational scripting for the customer service representatives, or CSRs, revising our Courtesy Notification Tags and Disconnection Notice Tags to provide additional information to our customers and to continue implementing a service level plan to maintain customer satisfaction at every level.

After analyzing the new process of this new notification program and ensuring the success of the changes that we needed to make, we began to immediately identify, review, and analyze data from monthly reports regarding our collection efforts in the field. We implemented this change to our notification program on July 1, 2016, beginning with our cycle-one customers.

Solution of the Program:

The revised law indicates that an owner, tenant, or lessee that does not pay the full amount of charges, penalty and interest in water provided or cease such sewer disposal within 30 days after their bill becomes delinquent, the locality or utilities supplying water or sewer services for the use of such service shall notify the owner, tenant, or lessee of the delinquency. If the owner, tenant, or lessee does not pay the full amount of charges, penalty and interest in water provided or cease within 60 days after the delinquent fees, and charges for water services are due, the

locality of utility supplying water and sewer services may cease supplying water and sewer services unless a health officer certifies that shutting off the water will endanger the health of the occupants of the premises or the health of others. The customer has 90 days to pay their bill, from the date of the initial bill, and the customer will receive four notifications from the Chesterfield Utilities Department before the service can be disconnected. The fifth notification is the disconnection notice.

The revised law required us to change our courtesy notification process to the fourth notice that provides delinquent customers an additional ten business days to pay their bill before service is disconnected. The additional ten business days are the days given after we provide the customer 60 days of additional time to pay their bill from the original past due date. The fee structure for the courtesy notification didn't change. We created a billing calendar that accommodates the dates for the courtesy notifications and disconnections while at the same time following the structure that we had to implement. We also changed and modified the content of the bottom right side of the Bimonthly Water/Sewer Bill (new blue bill) to add "*Notice: Service Subject to Disconnection if this amount is not immediately paid. On the top portion of the bill, if the customer has a previous balance, an asterisk (*) will show the customer the balance as a reminder. The new blue bill the customer receives serves as the 30-days of notice from their previous bill that has not been paid. If the customer has not paid their previous bill, it will show all totals on their new bill. This is the third notice.

We established conversational standards and expectations for our customer service representatives to ensure that every delinquent customer receives great service. We scripted conversations as guides that established standard responses to customer inquiries, questions, concerns, objections, complaints, etc., regarding our new notification initiatives that will result in positive feedback for both the customer and the department. The scripts targeted only delinquent customers ensuring that customers who paid their bills on time were not involved in our communications scripting. We provided a uniform explanation of our notification changes when delinquent customers questioned our customer service representative either by telephone calls, for walk-in customers inquiring or paying delinquent bills, and field personnel who disconnect water service for non-payment. We provided an explanation to all customers who have been disconnected because of non-payment of what they needed to do to have service reconnected and

we provided an easy way to understand the explanation of the new program that was passed by the Virginia General Assembly for anyone that questions the disconnection of service after receiving another blue bill. The conversational scripting provided for both "90-days pending and in-effect" notification to delinquent customers when they first receive their original bill.

We redesigned the courtesy notification and disconnection notice tags to reflect changes in our notification process. The courtesy notification tags indicate that the past due balance and the customers are given 10 days before being disconnected. We reviewed the disconnection notice tag to provide customers with a better format for identifying and understanding the amount owed for reconnection of water service due to non-payment. Revising the courtesy notification and disconnection notification tags required involvement of our CIS software agents in updating the field of notification dates. The billing calendar was changed to include days for the customers to pay their bills which created additional work for the senior automation analyst to reconfigure the dates to accommodate the requirements of the notification program.

We identified and discussed the notification program with four other utilities in our area, discussing their notification practices and in the end it was determined that our utilities will be the first locality to implement the notification changes. We shared our new billing calendar, courtesy and disconnection notices and our notification processes to other utilities that requested to make their transition to the program easier. We identified the impact of changes on our customer service levels, anticipating the impact of increasing our average handle time for telephone calls, walk-in customers and courtesy notification and disconnection notification field visits because of our proactive communication efforts.

We estimated that monthly, approximately 13,352 customers, or 26 percent of our customer base receives a delinquent bill. Recognizing that our single greatest challenge in implementing any changes in our collections program would be communicating the notification changes to our customers and employees in a timely and understandable manner. We identified all the potential communication notifications available to us for implementing this program, the cost to implement the program, time availability of the program, and ensuring that we collect delinquent funds from our customers. We identified six ways available to us to communicate with our customers of their delinquent status. We concluded that to ensure our customers are aware of

their delinquent status and comply with the program we utilized the following customer communication channels: regular blue bill (first notice), delinquent bill – red bill (second notice), the new blue bill (new billing period) with the "Notice" wording indicating that your previous bill was not paid (third notice), the courtesy notification tag (blue tag) that will be hung at the door (fourth notice) giving customers ten business days to pay their bill after the blue tag is hung, and the disconnection notification tag (fifth notice) hung after the customer's water service was cut off.

Use of Technology:

To make sure the implementation of the notification program was a success, we needed to adopt a disciplined resource planning and management process that allowed for daily review and update of identifiable performance indicators and processes. We adopted steps to ensure that our communication efforts with our staff were successful along with our systems staff for changes and modifications that needed to be completed in our CIS system to make the process work. Our senior automation analysts worked diligently to make the billing schedule work in our CIS system; the changes of the format for the courtesy notification and disconnection notice dates changed in the CIS system, and the "notice" portion of the new bill print.

First, we held training sessions at the beginning of the program with employees to identify possible issues that may cause changes in our performance indicators, to identify customer reaction to the program notifications, and to discuss any unusual circumstances or occurrences the week implementation began. Second, we selected key performance indicators to monitor increases in the number of telephone calls to our call center, changes in our abandoned call rate or average handling time per call, increases in the number of walk-in customers or number of drop box payments, changes in the number of courtesy notifications or disconnection notices delivered, and increases in the number of customer complaints about the program. Third, during the week of implementation we met to analyze possible problems if there were any. Lastly, at the end of the first billing cycle implementation, we identified and developed an action plan to address any changes to our communication efforts. We revised our scheduling of staff to handle the possible increased workload requirements.

The Cost of the Program:

The expenses to adapt the program was minimal. We spent less than \$1,000 for printing approximately 3,000 new courtesy notification and disconnection notification door tags. We studied the impact of discussing our new notification program with customers when they contacted our customer service representatives and their responses. The CSR's were monitored because we anticipated delinquent customers' telephone conversations would require explaining why they received notices when they just received their current bill and why they have a high bill due to not paying their past due bill. We would see an increase in the response time for each telephone call. We anticipated an increase in walk-in customers inquiring about the status of their delinquent bill and forecasted an increase in the number of walk-in counter payments. This allows our CSR's to focus on informing the customer to pay their bill on time to avoid notifications prior to disconnection. For our field services staff, we didn't see any increase in the response time for each courtesy notification and disconnection visit by a senior meter reader to the customer's property, so there is no additional cost for hanging the tags. Training of the legalities of the notification process to the staff was minimal and the cost of the training for labor was around \$675 dollars for 45 employees. It took one hour of training to cover the information related to the process changes. We gathered everyone in one setting and presented the new notification program in an Excel and PowerPoint presentation. Questions by the staff were answered appropriately and timely.

The Results/Benefits/Success of the Program:

We began our program on July 1, 2016, beginning with the cycle one disconnection date of October 3, 2016, with the cycle one bill date of July 6, 2016, and completed disconnections of all cycles (cycles one through eight) by November 28, 2016. During this disconnection period and beginning with cycle one in October, as the starting period for disconnection, we received 8,238 telephone calls which includes new services installations, we distributed 7,708 courtesy notification tags and distributed 1,049 disconnection tags. We completed hanging courtesy notification tags and disconnection tags for each cycle once we started this program.

There was a slight increase in the response time of customer contact during the implementation of this program which meant that we successfully explained the changes to customers when they called. For the month of October, we received 8,238 calls which is a 14 percent increase from the prior month's 7,238 customer calls. We determined that neither our service levels nor our customer satisfaction levels were impacted by our new notification process because our CSRs had a comprehensive understanding of the program and its impact on the customers' bill.

This also lead to better communications with the Health Department because the program requires the two departments to communicate with each other. The Health Officer (Health Department Director) is the only person that can prevent the customer's water from being disconnected if the need of the service must continue due to health reasons. We developed a plan to make sure both departments communicated with any customer that needed guidance and assistance. The plan became part of the procedure that was written for the program implementation that our department staff must follow.

The billing calendar created for the notification program helps tremendously with our staff. It is clear and precise. To fully understand the process of the notification program, see example below:

Cycle 1 Billing Date

- Bill date 7/6/2016 (blue bill original bill) First Notification to the customer
- Past due date 8/1/2016
- Second notice 8/3/2016 (red bill second notice that the customer has not paid the original bill)
- 9/7/2016 New Bill comes out this is for the new billing period for the customer It also serves as the 30 days of delinquent notice from the unpaid first bill (7/6/2016). The "*Notice" is listed on the bill if you have a previous balance. This is the third notice.
- 9/12/2016 The Courtesy Notification starts This is the fourth notice. The courtesy notification for this cycle will be distributed from 9/12-9/16 (five days)
- Customer is given 10 business days to pay the delinquent bill once the courtesy notification is delivered.

- 10/3/2016 The customer is disconnected if payment is not received. The disconnection notice is delivered. This is the fifth notification.
- In summary, the customer is given four notifications plus 10 business days thereafter before disconnection for non-payment of the bill.

The Implementation/Overview of the Program:

One of the more positive outcomes from changes to our notification program is that the customers are notified several times prior to disconnection. This minimizes the disconnection service orders because customers are paying their bill prior to disconnection.

We discussed the implementation of the new program to all sections involved, to ensure that everyone understood the process and implementation of the program. We discussed the expectations that we wanted to achieve and what outcomes we expected to know that we were following the process correctly and abiding by the rules implemented by the General Assembly of Virginia. The categories of discussion are as follows:

- Customer understanding of the process We educated our call-in and walk-in delinquent customers of the new law. We encouraged customers not to take the law for granted because giving them more notices does not absolve them from paying their bill. The program has decreased the number of disconnections of services.
- Cross training Employee training and understanding of the law. PowerPoint
 presentation of the program, explaining the scheduling of the calendar and scripting of
 possible conversations to the customer about the program.
- Implementation of new procedure Created a new procedure to understand what we can and can't do because of the program.
- 4. Understanding behavior –Being aware of the behavior of the customer and of the employee because of the program. What negative and positive impacts the program will have in our collections process? We are trying to make the customer aware of their pastdue balances.

- 5. Work Schedule implications Staying longer to complete the actions that we are going to take to implement the process.
- 6. Teamwork with other departments Open communication with the Health Department regarding customers that require water service to stay on.
- Recognition of Employees Recognizing employees that are customer service oriented and receives good feedback from customers.

Perhaps our biggest concern for implementing our new notification program was dealing with customer complaints of how many times we are reminding them of their delinquent balances. Our concern with implementing a new notification procedure dealt with the potential of having an increase in customer complaints to the county administration offices, elected officials, or senior management in the Chesterfield Utilities Department. After completing all cycles, we have not had any complaints from our customers. Customer complaints are not likely to occur in this situation because the notifications allowed them to pay their bill, and it was in the customers favor as a reminder, but we still wanted to make sure that we helped every customer that required help. We provided them with notices and warnings of the disconnection process, in return they couldn't argue that they were not informed. To date, there have been no escalated calls concerning our new notification program to upper management.

Program Summary:

In completing six months of the notification program in place with the starting date of the program July 1, 2016, we have delivered and completed 100 percent of disconnection notifications (1,049 tags delivered and 1,049 tags completed). In comparison with the previous six months prior to the implementation of the program, there were 2,216 customers scheduled for disconnections and we completed 1,752 disconnections (79 percent completion). This was an increase in completion percentage. This is because customers were given extra days to pay their bill plus we also have more time to complete the disconnection tasks.

We developed a plan to address all issues and details identified with bill modifications, creating a billing calendar, courtesy notification, and disconnection notification tags. We reviewed all publications, forms and written documents associated with the disconnection process and

recommended additions, deletions, and changes. We brainstormed to identify all issues and details associated with these changes developing and implementing a communications plan and conversational scripting for our CSR's when speaking to our delinquent customers. In FY12, we had 132,705 delinquent accounts; in FY13, we had 126,709 delinquent accounts; FY14 we had 154,446 delinquent accounts; FY15, we had 141,570; and in FY16, we had 160,233 accounts that were delinquent. For the last five months of 8 billing cycles, we had 58,977 delinquent accounts. It is 8 percent less than previous year (the same timeframe) with 63,792 delinquent accounts. It is 8 percent less delinquency on our accounts. The trend is customers are paying their bill prior to disconnected. Once they see their new bill (third notice), they realize that they have not paid their previous bill. We also are not giving extensions to pay their bill. The process is encouraging because we are completing tasks that we couldn't prior to these changes, especially the disconnection of service due to time constraints.

In addition, we addressed all customer-service level reductions to see that the customers most likely affected by this new notification program. Because of our new notification procedure and our corresponding communication efforts for delinquent customers and staff, we have seen a significant improvement in our call-center measurement for calls received. This quarter, we answered 95 percent of all calls. We also completed all the cycles courtesy notifications and disconnection process in this quarter. Customers are paying their bills because they are given four notices before disconnection and have 90 days from the original bill date to pay them. This is now an advantage for the customer as it gives them more time to pay. Our new notification program has reduced the number of services cut-offs for non-payment, overtime hours for field services personnel has decreased and there are less calls to the operations and maintenance center for after-hours service connections. The success of our new notification program and our commitment for communicating the intent, purpose, and content of the program to our customers is reflected in the fact that since the implementation we have not received any customer complaints because the customers knew that this change was beneficial to them. We have been successful in implementing the changes required by the General Assembly of Virginia, and in return, it helped us tremendously in completing our notification process to our customers that are delinquent in paying their bill.

VISUAL DATA:

Billing Calendar

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Chesterfield County - Utility Billing and Collections Calendar

CYCLE	BILL	PAST DUE AFTER	SECOND NOTICE	TERM AFTER	C/N	DIN	CYCLE	BILL	PAST DUE AFTER	SECOND NOTICE	TERM AFTER	C/N	DIN
01	07/06/16	08/01/16	08/03/16	08/18/16	09/12/16	10/03/16	05	08/03/16	08/29/16	08/31/16	09/15/16	10/10/16	11/01/16
01	09/07/16	10/03/16	10/05/16	10/20/16	11/14/16	12/07/16	05	10/05/16	10/31/16	11/02/16	11/17/16	12/12/16	01/04/17
01	11/02/16	11/28/16	11/30/16	12/15/16	01/09/17	01/31/17	05	12/07/16	01/03/17	01/05/17	01/20/17	02/13/17	03/06/17
01	01/04/17	01/30/17	02/01/17	02/16/17	03/13/17	04/03/17	05	02/01/17	02/27/17	03/01/17	03/16/17	04/10/17	05/01/17
01	03/01/17	03/27/17	03/29/17	04/13/17	05/08/17	05/30/17	05	04/05/17	05/01/17	05/03/17	05/18/17	06/12/17	07/05/17
01	05/03/17	05/30/17	05/31/17	06/15/17	07/10/17	07/31/17	05	06/07/17	07/03/17	07/05/17	07/20/17	08/14/17	09/05/17
CYCLE	BILL	PAST DUE AFTER	SECOND NOTICE	TERM AFTER	C/N	DIN	CYCLE	BILL	PAST DUE AFTER	SECOND NOTICE	TERM AFTER	C/N	DIN
02	07/13/16	08/08/16	08/10/16	08/25/16	09/19/16	10/10/16	06	08/10/16	09/06/16	09/08/16	09/23/16	10/17/16	11/07/16
02	09/14/16	10/10/16	10/12/16	10/27/16	11/21/16	12/12/16	06	10/12/16	11/07/16	11/09/16	11/2 4 /16	12/19/16	01/11/17
02	11/09/16	12/05/16	12/07/16	12/22/16	01/17/17	02/06/17	06	12/14/16	01/09/17	01/11/17	01/26/17	02/20/17	03/13/17
02	01/11/17	02/06/17	02/08/17	02/23/17	03/20/17	04/10/17	06	02/08/17	03/06/17	03/08/17	03/23/17	04/17/17	05/08/17
02	03/08/17	04/03/17	04/05/17	04/20/17	05/15/17	06/05/17	06	04/12/17	05/08/17	05/10/17	05/25/17	06/19/17	07/11/17
02	05/10/17	06/05/17	06/07/17	06/22/17	07/17/17	08/07/17	06	06/14/17	07/10/17	07/12/17	07/27/17	08/21/17	09/12/17
CYCLE	BILL	PAST DUE AFTER	SECOND NOTICE	TERM AFTER	C/N	DIN	CYCLE	BILL	PAST DUE AFTER	SECOND NOTICE	TERM AFTER	C/N	DIN
03	07/20/16	08/15/16	08/17/16	09/01/16	09/26/16	10/17/16	07	08/17/16	09/12/16	09/14/16	09/29/16	10/24/16	11/15/16
03	09/21/16	10/17/16	10/19/16	11/03/16	11/28/16	12/19/16	07	10/19/16	11/14/16	11/16/16	12/01/16	12/27/16	01/18/17
03	11/16/16	12/12/16	12/14/16	12/29/16	01/23/17	02/13/17	07	12/21/16	01/17/17	01/19/17	02/03/17	02/27/17	03/20/17
03	01/18/17	02/13/17	02/15/17	03/02/17	03/27/17	04/17/17	07	02/15/17	03/13/17	03/15/17	03/30/17	04/24/17	05/15/17
03	03/15/17	04/10/17	04/12/17	04/27/17	05/22/17	06/13/17	07	04/19/17	05/15/17	05/17/17	06/01/17	06/26/17	07/18/17
03	05/17/17	06/12/17	06/14/17	06/29/17	07/24/17	08/14/17	07	06/21/17	07/17/17	07/19/17	08/03/17	08/28/17	09/19/17
CYCLE	BILL	PAST DUE AFTER	SECOND NOTICE	TERM AFTER	C/N	DIN	CYCLE	BILL	PAST DUE AFTER	SECOND NOTICE	TERM AFTER	C/N	DIN
04	07/27/16	08/22/16	08/24/16	09/08/16	10/03/16	10/24/16	08	08/24/16	09/19/16	09/21/16	10/06/16	10/31/16	11/22/16
04	09/28/16	10/24/16	10/26/16	11/10/16	12/05/16	12/27/16	08	10/26/16	11/21/16	11/23/16	12/08/16	01/03/17	01/25/17
04	11/23/16	12/19/16	12/21/16	01/05/17	01/30/17	02/20/17	08	12/28/16	01/23/17	01/25/17	02/09/17	03/06/17	03/27/17
04	01/25/17	02/20/17	02/22/17	03/09/17	04/03/17	04/24/17	08	02/22/17	03/20/17	03/22/17	04/06/17	05/01/17	05/22/17
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04	03/22/17	04/17/17	04/19/17	05/04/17	05/30/17	06/19/17	08	04/26/17	05/22/17	05/24/17	06/08/17	07/03/17	07/24/17

Courtesy Notification Tag (Fourth Notice)

06/21/17

07/06/17

07/31/17

08/21/17

08

06/28/17

06/19/17

05/24/17

04

A Chesterfield Utilities field representative was here today to remind you of your past due water and/or wastewater bill. If the past due balance of \$119.13 is not received by 10/24/2016 at the Chesterfield County Department of Utilities, service will be disconnected without further notification. A \$10.00 fee will be added to the past due balance for this notification. Total Amount Due: 129.13

1

Disconnection Notice Tag (Fifth Notice)

07/26/17

08/10/17

09/05/17

09/25/17

07/24/17

Address: 2624 KINGSDALE RD	
Meter #: 79936074 Meter Sequence #:	00410
Date: 10/20/2016 Time:	
Your service was disconnected due to non-payme balance. A \$30.00 charge is assested to restore s disconnection. Total Amount Due: \$97.97	nt of your past due ervice after service