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PSC Opens Investigation into Liberty Mobile Amid Migration Concerns

PSC Commissioners blast Liberty executives for service disruptions and poor customer response

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Weeks after Liberty Wireless was [grilled by lawmakers](#) over the ongoing disruption being caused by its migration efforts, the company's new country manager Ravindra Maywahlall faced similar tough questioning from the Public Services Commission on Tuesday.

PSC Executive Director Sandra Satori told commissioners that the agency had been deluged with customer complaints, and had, prior to a January meeting with Liberty representatives, also surveyed social media platforms to understand what former AT&T customers who had undergone the transition had to say. According to the findings of PSC staff, complaints included the quality of incoming and outgoing calls, delayed texts, dropped calls and area coverage issues. "Service

issues continued even after the customers received system upgrades,” Ms. Satori noted, “including increased spam notifications, and issues with number portability.”

She recommended to commissioners that they “open a docket to monitor and investigate Liberty’s acquisition of AT&T, the migration process and system upgrades in addition to the quality of wireless service in the territory.”

PSC Commissioner Laura Nichols-Samms, herself a newly migrated Liberty customer, described her own experience with the process, saying that many pre-migration messages were delivered in Spanish. “Luckily, I do speak Spanish. But that’s a problem, because a lot of people don’t.” When she was undergoing the migration process, she disclosed that she lost connectivity. “My system got cut out. I didn’t have service for a whole day,” which she said necessitated a trip from St. John to Liberty’s St. Thomas office, where she met a line of people experiencing the same issue. She said that the issues with network quality, which customers had been experiencing before the network migration, “seems like it’s gotten worse.”

The PSC commissioner questioned Liberty representatives about what was being done to roll out improvements to the service.

In response Mr. Maywahlall acknowledged the language issue, and said that since he joined the company he has pushed for engineers to identify USVI customers and ensure that messages are generated in English. “We’re also working with our contact centers to increase the number of English speaking agents that are on the shifts,” he noted. Additionally, Liberty has moved from a “first-come first-served” basis in dealing with customer complaints, to the implementation of “fast track lines” that will provide assistance to “seniors, emergency workers, health workers, elected officials, and teachers,” among other priority groups, the new country manager said.

Mr. Maywahlall confirmed that there was compensation being offered for service issues on a case-by-case basis. “We are looking into ways to identify customers who have been without service for a long period,” he said, adding that a list of customers eligible for credit was being compiled. However, Mr. Maywahlall was not able to answer the question as to how that list had been generated.

For the most part, commissioners were unsatisfied with Liberty’s efforts thus far. With no presence on St. John, customers asked to come in to receive new SIM cards or devices would have to make the trip to St. Thomas to do so. That is inexcusable, according to Commissioner David Hughes. “You’re telling [people] they’ve got to get on a ferry, spend half a day and probably 50-60 bucks in cab fare...because you don’t want to put somebody in the supermarket for three or four months while you get 80 or 90 percent of the population migrated...From a customer service perspective, you need to fix that immediately,” Mr. Hughes continued, demanding that a presence on St. John be established “within the next week or so.”

Meanwhile, Commissioner Raymond Williams, also a Liberty customer, said that the company’s handling of the migration had been abysmal. “The quality of service standards are grossly unacceptable,” he said. Mr. Williams warned the company risks losing more subscribers, including himself, if problems aren’t fixed swiftly. “The timelines that Liberty is providing to customers is grossly unacceptable,” he declared. “Concerns are not being met or answered.”

Apart from the lack of a St. John office, Mr. Williams also highlighted the dearth of senior management in the territory itself. Commissioners learned that only two members of the management team reside in the USVI, including Mr. Maywahlall himself, a circumstance that commissioners believe is contributing to the problem.

Bala Balakrishnan, Liberty's migration program manager, provided technical details about the migration process, noting that engineers had been engaged in a lengthy process of testing each model of phone used by customers to determine compatibility with their network, as phones from years past had varying levels of support. He said that customers were notified via text if their phones would not work on Liberty's network, but many did not act on the warnings because they had not read the text messages.

Mr. Balakrishnan said that Liberty had established a multi-level support process to assist customers dealing with post-migration issues, escalating more complex problems to a "war room" of specialized technicians. This support structure is being scaled up as migration volume increases, he said, but acknowledged that unanticipated problems still arise.

At the beginning of the migration process, between 7 and 8 percent of customers across the USVI and Puerto Rico began experiencing issues. That proportion is now down to less than 5 percent, Mr. Balakrishnan reported.

However, commissioners made it clear that they were not satisfied with Liberty's efforts in this regard. "When Microsoft rolls out a new version of Windows, and it blows up on them, they stop," remarked PSC Commissioner Hughes. "They stop migration, they do not encourage people to continue to run into their brick wall." In contrast, Liberty's approach, Mr. Hughes contended, was to move "fully forward at whatever speed you can use. And I find that to be a...tragic approach actually, from a customer service perspective, which we are principally concerned with." Mr. Hughes said that he found it "almost inexcusable that you guys continued once you knew you were going to have these problems."

Ultimately, commissioners agreed to follow the staff recommendation, and voted in the majority to open the docket to monitor and investigate Liberty's migration process. If the company is not able to adequately demonstrate a commitment to addressing service issues and customer complaints, regulators may consider alternative enforcement measures.