

Consumer Assistance

The Consumer Assistance Staff responded to 5,766 consumer complaints, comments or inquiries in calendar year 2000 - of which 87 percent were from residential customers. Nearly two-thirds, 63 percent, of the contacts with the commission concerned telecommunications companies. Forty-three percent of those telecommunications contacts involved Qwest Communications.

Twenty-two percent of the commission's 5,766 consumer assistance contacts involved energy utilities, 54 percent of those about Idaho Power Company. Five percent of all contacts concerned water utilities and 10 percent were not related to a specific regulated utility.

Six percent of the commission's contacts concerned service quality problems; 25 percent concerned utility rates and policies; 2 percent involved unauthorized carrier switching (also known as *slamming*), and 2 percent involved deceptive marketing practices and telemarketing issues.

Other categories included: credit and collection issues, 19 percent; disputed billings, 20 percent; line extensions or service upgrades, 6 percent; and miscellaneous, 20 percent.

While dispute resolution remains an important task, it is hoped that by working with consumer groups, social service agencies, and utilities, persistent causes of consumer difficulties can be identified and addressed.

Consumer complaints present an opportunity for utilities and the commission to learn the effect of utility practices and policies on people. For example, the unintentional and perhaps unfair impact of a rule or regulation might be discovered in the course of investigating a complaint. In such cases an informal, negotiated remedy may not be possible, and formal action by the commission would be required. The Consumer Assistance Staff's participation in formal rate and policy cases before the commission is the primary method used to address these issues.

The Consumer Assistance Staff is able to respond to many consumer contacts without extensive investigation, however 64 percent of consumer contacts required investigation by the staff and are classified as informal complaints. Fifty-six percent of investigations resulted in reversal or modification of the utilities' original action.

Toll Free Complaint Line

The commission, in January 1992, established a toll-free "800" telephone line for receiving utility complaints and inquiries from consumers outside the Boise area. The toll-free line (1-800-432-0369) is reserved for inquiries and complaints concerning utilities.

Consumers may also file a complaint electronically via the commission's Website at www.puc.state.id.us.