



**MINUTES OF THE
OFFICE OF THE OHIO CONSUMERS' COUNSEL GOVERNING BOARD**

April 30, 2020

Members Present: Chair Michael Watkins
Mr. Stuart Young, Vice-Chair
Mr. Tim Callion
Ms. Cheryl Grossman
Ms. Kelly Moore
Mr. Charles Newman
Ms. Jan Shannon
Ms. Andra Troyer
Mr. David Wondolowski

CALL TO ORDER BY CHAIR:

Chair Watkins called the meeting to order at approximately 10:00 A.M. Ms. Hunyadi called the roll, with members present as shown above. The meeting was held by conference call, as allowed by law during the coronavirus crisis. (Ms. Grossman was in attendance; however, her line was muted during the call and therefore references in these minutes to votes do not include her votes.)

MEETING MINUTES:

Chair Watkins asked for a motion to approve the minutes of the January 14, 2020 Board meeting. A motion was made by Ms. Moore to approve the minutes. Ms. Shannon seconded the motion. Ms. Hunyadi called the roll. The January 14, 2020 Board meeting minutes were approved unanimously.

CONSUMERS' COUNSEL BRUCE WESTON:

Mr. Weston welcomed everyone to the first-ever remote OCC Governing Board Meeting. He explained this arrangement was authorized by state law during the coronavirus crisis.

RECOGNITION:

Mr. Weston recognized Kerry Adkins, Senior Regulatory Analyst, as the Employee of the Quarter for the 3rd quarter of 2019. Kerry has more than 29 years of experience in public service regulating utilities at the PUCO. His experience includes investigations and audits, drafting and enforcing PUCO rules, testifying as an expert witness, and involvement in public policy making on issues affecting Ohio consumers.

Mr. Weston also recognized Angela O'Brien, Assistant Consumers' Counsel, as the Employee of the Quarter for the 4th quarter of 2019. Angela practiced as an attorney for 10 years in the Regulated Industries and Litigation departments of Mayer Brown, LLP in Chicago. Prior to joining Mayer Brown, she practiced in the Energy, Telecommunications and Utilities group of Barnes & Thornburg, LLP in Indianapolis, Indiana. Her work at both firms included representing incumbent local exchange carriers and competitive natural gas and retail electric suppliers before state public utility commissions.

GUEST SPEAKER – SUSAN JAGERS, DIRECTOR, OHIO POVERTY LAW CENTER:

Deputy Director Larry Sauer introduced Ms. Jagers who spoke to the Board members about consumer issues magnified by the coronavirus crisis. Of primary concern is the need to maintain stable housing and access to utilities for those in need. She said people's lives have been turned upside down by this crisis with loss of employment and/or decreased income. Many low-wage earners will struggle to make ends meet as they are working in jobs that already pay below the poverty level. If people lose their housing and become homeless, this could affect the spread of the virus. Though evictions have been temporarily stopped and utilities cannot be disconnected, at the end of the crisis rent and utility obligations remain. With the stay-at-home order in place, people are using their utilities more, resulting in higher utility bills. Ms. Jagers acknowledged the expanded unemployment benefits and the one-time federal stimulus will help but it doesn't provide housing stability. She said the Ohio Poverty Law Center is focused on helping people obtain rental and utility assistance and set up payment plans so they can stay in their homes.

Ms. Jagers also noted the disparity with access to the Internet. The digital divide has become very apparent with the need for people to work from home and children to attend school remotely. The Internet is how people connect with nearly everything in life with work, school and health. Not only is the lack of access a rural problem, it is also a problem in cities. For example, she said 27% of the Cleveland population has no Internet access.

Ms. Jagers said there have been improvements to existing programs that support low-income Ohioans. And she is hopeful for continuing to strengthen the safety-net structure moving forward.

Mr. Weston asked Ms. Jagers about the problem of food insecurity. Ms. Jagers commented that while it was a problem before the crisis, it has worsened with the crisis. Food banks are overwhelmed with the need. A change to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is providing additional help.

Ms. Shannon commented that in Pickaway County, prior to the crisis, the food bank saw an average of 850 requests per month. Recently, in just one day there were 850 requests.

Ms. Jagers ended her remarks saying with the loss of income support for housing, utilities and food are greatly needed.

Mr. Weston noted the Ohio Consumers' Counsel has a long history of seeking to protect Ohioans and at-risk consumers. And he said OCC has pointed out that subsidy charges for utilities are taking money from people who lack money. He added an example that regarding DP&L charges, 30% of the Dayton area population is in poverty.

BOARD MEETING SCHEDULE CHANGES:

Due to the health emergency, Vice-Chair Young made a motion to cancel the May 12th and July 21st meetings and hold meetings on June 9th or 16th and August 11th or 18th. Mr. Newman seconded the motion. The motion was approved unanimously.

Vice-Chair Young said at the June meeting he would like an end of fiscal year update and hear about guidance from the legislature regarding next years' budget.

Ms. Shannon made a motion to hold the June meeting on the 17th at 9:00 a.m. Ms. Troyer seconded the motion. The motion was approved. The Chair added the meeting would be via teleconference.

REMARKS BY CONSUMERS' COUNSEL BRUCE WESTON:

Mr. Weston expressed his gratitude for Gov. DeWine and his leadership, during this crisis. Gov. DeWine and Dr. Acton have given confidence that we will forge a path through this crisis.

Mr. Weston noted health crisis resources have been added to the OCC webpage. A sign is posted on the door to the OCC offices letting people know that our consumer protection work continues remotely even though not from the office. And the sign provides contact information for those who need to contact the office. Per the Governor's directive OCC staff will continue to telework for the foreseeable future. Mr. Weston shared a recent New York Times editorial headline that included: "Stop Dawdling. People Need Money." He went on to add that OCC staff is continuing its work to help Ohioans save money.

Next, Mr. Weston shared that the National Consumer Law Center had prepared a document listing actions that can be taken to keep utility services on and to make those services affordable. OCC is including this information in filings with the PUCO for consumer protection during the emergency.

He commended the PUCO for asking utilities to suspend consumers' disconnections due to the health emergency. He said the Ohio EPA banned the disconnections of water service for consumers unable to pay their bills and required reconnection for consumers who were disconnected. And the FCC called on telephone companies to not terminate service because of consumers' inability to pay due to the pandemic and to not involuntarily remove them from Lifeline assistance.

Mr. Weston reported a rally was held Wednesday afternoon in Cleveland with people wanting the mayor and leaders of FirstEnergy and Dominion Energy to reconnect utility service to customers whose service was shut off before the coronavirus pandemic started. Since the pandemic began the companies have not been disconnecting service of those who cannot pay, but many people lost their utility service before the coronavirus crisis began.

OCC provided written testimony, by Jim Williams (Senior Utility Consumer Policy Analyst), to the Ohio Development Services Agency regarding the 2020 Home Weatherization Assistance Program (HWAP) and Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). OCC asked that those funds be used for low-income bill payment assistance (instead of for low-income weatherization) to help Ohioans who desperately need bill payment assistance during the time of this coronavirus emergency.

He said OCC filed a motion with the PUCO to ban door-to-door sales during the emergency, to protect Ohioans' health.

OCC FISCAL REPORT:

Mr. Weston reported for Fiscal Year 2020 (which started July 1, 2019), the agency has committed approximately \$4.3 million or approximately 79% of the total annual budget of \$5.54 million

He shared with the Board how the OCC is responding to Gov. DeWine's request for state agencies to make 20% budget cuts from uncommitted funds. He said although OCC is not a cabinet agency, it is not exempt from the cost cutting measures and that accordingly OCC identified \$125,000 for a reduction from the current budget. For Fiscal Year 2021 (beginning July 1, 2020), he said OCC is waiting on guidance from the administration. OCC's funding comes from assessments on utility companies and receives no support from the General Revenue Fund (taxes). Mr. Weston said OCC provides a service that has the potential, and the reality, of saving consumers money and the OCC budget is put to good use. He also noted the agency has already sustained a significant budget cut from the prior administration in 2011.

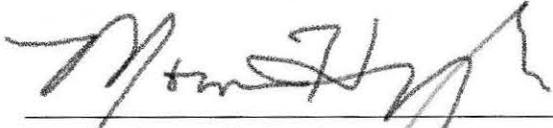
Mr. Callion made a motion to adjourn the meeting. It was seconded by Mr. Wondolowski. Ms. Hunyadi called the roll. The motion was unanimously approved.

The meeting adjourned at 10:55 A.M.

I verify that the above meeting minutes have been approved and ratified by the Consumers' Counsel Governing Board on June 17, 2020.



Michael Watkins, Chair



Monica Hunyadi, Interim Secretary
Ohio Consumers' Counsel Governing Board