



Control Number: 50664



Item Number: 7

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March 18, 2020

Central Records Filing Clerk
Public Utility Commission of Texas
1701 N. Congress Avenue
Austin, Texas 78701

Re: Project No. 50664; *Issues Related to the State of Disaster for the Coronavirus Disease 2019*

Dear Filing Clerk:

In response to the Public Utility Commission of Texas' (Commission) request for interested parties to inform the Commission of initiatives related to COVID-19, I am writing to provide a summary of initiatives that Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc. (Eastex or Cooperative) has taken thus far. While this is a rapidly evolving situation that may require further action, Eastex continues to monitor the outbreak of COVID-19 and evaluate business practices to protect customers and employees so that we can continue to provide reliable critical telecommunications services to the communities, in which we live. During this time when employers are encouraging employees to work from home and government officials at all levels are encouraging citizens to exercise social distancing tactics to prevent the transmission of COVID-19, Eastex is cognizant of the uniquely important role that it plays as a telecommunications provider in keeping our members connected. Thanks to the advanced telecommunications network Eastex and its affiliates operate, customers across our rural service territory are able to practice the recommended social distancing by working remotely, accessing remote or distance learning tools for their families, engaging in online commerce to obtain the supplies they need, and/or utilizing telemedicine resources. Due to our important role during this crisis, Eastex is taking appropriate precautions to ensure that it is able to supply critical services to customers for the duration of this emergency.

On February 27, 2020, Eastex issued an e-mail to all employees informing them that the Cooperative was enforcing the guidelines adopted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) related to self-quarantine for anyone returning from China after February 3, 2020 for a 14-day period. Eastex also ordered additional hygiene supplies for all offices in accordance with the Cooperative's pandemic plan. Eastex requested that any employees inform supervisors of any illnesses and encouraged employees to exercise best practices for decreasing the spread of bacteria and/or viruses including, but not limited to, staying at home if sick, washing hands regularly, and other precautionary actions consistent with the Cooperative's pandemic plan and current CDC

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and World Health Organization guidelines. Eastex informed the Commission of those actions via e-mail to Shawn Hazard, the Commission's Emergency Management Coordinator on March 13, 2020.

On March 16, 2020, Eastex provided the attached COVID-19 Press Release to the public outlining further measures that the Cooperative is implementing to ensure its ability to continue to provide critical services to our customers in a responsible manner. To the extent necessary, Eastex may issue additional press releases in the future as we attempt to assist our communities.

Also, on March 16, 2020, Eastex informed its national association, NTCA, the Rural Broadband Association, that it was participating in the Federal Communications Commission's Keep Americans Connected Pledge. Under such pledge, Eastex will not terminate service to any residential or small business customers because of their inability to pay their bills due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Eastex has also pledged to waive any late fees that any residential or small business customers incur because of their economic circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In regard to opening Wi-Fi hotspots, Eastex does not currently operate any Wi-Fi hotspots but is working with local officials and schools to see if we can offer such assistance.

On March 17, 2020, Eastex participated in a conference call with other members of the Texas Telephone Association (TTA) to discuss TTA activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The undersigned serves as the chairman of the TTA Regulatory Committee. During that meeting, TTA provided critical information to members related to recent actions taken by the Commission during the emergency Open Meeting held on March 16, 2020 and asked members to keep the Commission informed on any actions taken in response to the COVID-19 virus by filing updates in the above-referenced project through the Commission's E-File system. TTA continues to work with Commission Staff to share further information and direction from the Commission to its members on an ongoing basis.

Also on March 17, 2020, due to a confirmed case of COVID-19 in Eastex's service area, Eastex closed the lobbies of its business offices to foot traffic and is asking customers to transact business through the Cooperative's drive-thru windows, via telephone, or online.

In addition to the above, Eastex is reaching out to local schools and leaders to explore initiatives to increase student connectivity and allow greater access to distance learning. Eastex is proactively exploring service promotions and other ways in which its network can be harnessed to increase connectivity for students, teachers, and others throughout its territory. We will provide a subsequent update on these efforts.

Eastex continues to monitor governmental agencies' websites including the Governor's Office, the Texas Department of State Health Services, the CDC, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the Commission, and will take further actions, as appropriate, to protect our customers and our employees. Eastex appreciates the

important role that the Commission plays in protecting the public interest during these trying times and is committed to working with the Commission as we work through this pandemic together. If the Commission feels that additional precautions are appropriate, Eastex is prepared to work with the Commission on such precautions. To the extent necessary, Eastex requests a waiver of any tariff provisions or Commission rules that might otherwise require the disconnection of service for nonpayment or the imposition of fees or charges related to any of the above measures we are taking to assist our customers. Additionally, during these unprecedented times, Eastex encourages the Commission to take a close look at its telecommunications tariff rules and consider temporarily suspending or, in the alternative, discretionarily enforcing certain tariff rules that would allow providers to temporarily waive or discount certain tariffed charges to customers affected by the outbreak. Such regulatory flexibility would eliminate regulatory hurdles and give providers the necessary flexibility to assist their communities during this crisis.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at (903) 854-1290 or at wes@eastex.com.

Very truly yours,



Wes Robinson
Director of Regulatory Affairs

Attachment



COVID-19 PRESS RELEASE

Eastex Telephone Cooperative, Inc. takes steps to protect against COVID-19

Like everyone, we have been monitoring the outbreak of COVID-19. We want you to know that we have response plans in place to help ensure that we will be able to continue providing quality, reliable service to our community. The health of our customers and employees is very important to us; therefore, we have processes to help detect, prevent and control the spread of infectious diseases, like COVID-19, that might impact our workplace. We also want to inform you of other steps we are taking to assist our members and customers.

Our Processes to Help Detect, Prevent, and Control the Spread of Illness such as COVID-19:

- We do not allow our employees to work if they are sick. If an employee arrives at work exhibiting signs of illness, we immediately send the employee home. We provide sick leave so that our employees do not feel they have to work when they are sick.
- We are recommending that customers utilize our drive-thrus, contact us online (eastex.com/home/contact-us or through Facebook messenger @eastexcoop) or over the phone (800-232-7839 for Henderson and Waskom, 800-732-7839 for Livingston) for service inquiries or transactions.
- We encourage employees to practice social distancing when appropriate.
- For the safety of our field personnel, customers may be asked if they have any safety concerns that our staff should be aware of, or any concerns about our staff entering the customer's premises. If you have safety concerns, please call us to reschedule an existing appointment at (800-232-7839 for Henderson and Waskom, 800-732-7839 for Livingston).
- Employees will take appropriate sanitary precautions before entering a customer's premises and again after leaving the premises.
- In our business offices, we have increased surface cleaning protocols and are requiring employees to sanitize and/or wash hands frequently.

Other Steps We Are Taking to Assist Customers:

- You can pay your bill online or by mail, or in one of our drive-thrus. For online payments, just visit <https://www.eastex.com/home/customer-center/>.
- Contact us if you cannot afford your bill due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

GET THE FACTS! The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website provides updated information on the outbreak. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.

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