



Telephone Network Transition Collaborative

April 7, 2016

Meeting Minutes

Attendees:

Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) Staff, Connect Ohio, Ohio 911 Program Office, Ohio Telecom Association (OTA), AARP Ohio, Windstream, CenturyLink, Frontier, Southeastern Ohio Legal Services, Ohio Consumers Counsel (OCC), Ohio Cable Telecommunication Association (OCTA), Ohio Poverty Law Center, Buckeye Hills-HVRDD, Cincinnati Bell, AT&T, QSI Consulting, Verizon, Frontier Communications, Pro Seniors, Hobbs Consulting, VRI and Time Warner Cable, Level 3, Carpenter Lipps/Fibertech

Topics discussed:

- Medical Alert Systems-Remote Patient Monitoring – Eric Snell, VRI
- Technology Advancements-Distance Learning/Telemedicine – Dave Davidson, Frontier
- Fioptics – Kevin Mann, Cincinnati Bell Telephone (CBT)
- Universal Connectivity/Expansion of Advanced Services – Joe Gillan, OCTA

Medical Alert Systems-Remote Patient Monitoring questions/comments:

- PUCO staff asked how VRI determines wireless coverage for a client.
 - The VRI presenter stated the company used a third parties wireless coverage maps to determine wireless service in the area and the equipment installer test the strength and reliability of the signal.
- PUCO staff asked what devices are presently being used for clients.
 - The VRI presenter explained that VRI offers emergency buttons for the wrist or neck, which can be mobile or home-based desk-top units. The mobile units allow the client access in their home as well as away from home. The home-based units only provide service within the home. The presenter also stated that VRI offers Telehealth monitoring service.
- PUCO staff asked what type of vitals the Telehealth monitors?
 - The VRI presenter stated that telehealth monitors patient vitals such as weight, glucose levels, and blood pressure. This information is sent back to the doctor's office so the telehealth devices must have access to reliable service.
- The Connect Ohio representative asked where VRI gets the coverage maps it uses.

- The VRI presenter stated the company uses a third-party verification service to determine coverage in an area. When the technician goes to the client's home, the technician verifies if there is service available at the client's home.
- PUCO staff asked about VRI competitors.
 - The VRI presenter stated that the existence of competitors is very small and that he did not know the exact number.
- A consumer group representative asked for the demographics of the people VRI covers for these devices.
 - The VRI presenter stated that the majority of the company's clients were urban and over the age of 65.
- PUCO staff asked if VRI goes into the home to identify cell coverage.
 - The VRI presenter stated the company recommends using a landline because there is a monthly fee to provide wireless service.
- A cable industry representative asked if there is a distinction made between cable-based and traditional service offered by the incumbent local exchange carrier (ILEC) when providing service. The representative also asked whether VRI provides battery backup for service provided via cable "landline" service.
 - The VRI representative stated that the only distinction made between the two is that cable-based service requires the use of a unit that communicates digitally and also indicated VRI does not provide or offer battery backup.
- An industry representative asked if VRI is tracking areas that have no wireless coverage.
 - The VRI presenter stated that the company does not track areas without wireless coverage but it currently provides more cellular-based service, 39.5 %, versus analog service, 22%.
- A consumer group representative asked whether VRI tracks elderly clients who have landlines and whether some of these clients also have a cell phone when the device is connected to the landline.
 - The VRI presenter stated the company does not track elderly clients with a landline. The presenter also stated that some clients have a cell phone but they have no coverage inside their home.
- PUCO staff asked if VRI has any issues with insurance companies paying for the devices.
 - The VRI presenter stated the insurance companies pay for the devices when connecting to landline but cellular devices are not always covered. Therefore, if the client has no landline the insurance company may not pay for the device.
- A consumer advocate representative asked is there a good criterion to identify people with coverage issues (i.e. individuals most vulnerable to the transition).

- The VRI presenter stated that people reach out to VRI for assistance and to determine if coverage exists. Nonetheless, a survey of the geographic area is needed.
- PUCO staff asked if VRI distinguishes between mobile and fixed wireless. Staff also asked whether any clients have fixed wireless service.
 - The VRI presenter stated that the company does not distinguish between the two wireless services and they are not aware of any clients with fixed wireless service.
- A consumer group representative asked if the reliability and coverage problem is limited to rural clients.
 - The VRI presenter stated that most urban clients have coverage, but in some instances, coverage is shown but does not actually exist at the location.
- An industry representative asked whether VRI looked for coverage from providers who support their devices.
 - The VRI presenter stated that T-Mobile and AT&T Wireless currently support their devices but Sprint and Verizon will soon be coming aboard.

Technology Advancements-Distance Learning/Telemedicine presentation questions/comments:

- PUCO staff asked how the telemedicine service is connected.
 - The Frontier presenter stated service is provided on a digital subscriber line (DSL) that connects a health care provider through Frontier’s central office directly to a patient’s home without connecting to the internet.
- A cable representative asked if the high speed connection is shared with fiber that connects to the internet or is it a different loop directly to the customer location.
 - The Frontier presenter stated that there is a dedicated pair to the customer location.
- A cable representative asked why the high speed connection uses a dedicated pair.
 - The Frontier presenter stated that the dedicated pair is necessary to secure transmission of patient information in compliance with Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) laws.
- A consumer advocate representative asked whether the high speed direct connection would work in rural areas and if it was a Tier 3 service. The representative also asked if maps were showing where Frontier’s DSL is available.
 - The Frontier presenter stated that the service would only work where Frontier currently has DSL service. The presenter further stated that the Frontier can now offer DSL to 88% of households in Ohio and with the Connect America Fund (CAF) monies, an additional 65K homes will be reached in the next five years.

The presenter also stated that Frontier needs enterprise customers to connect to their central offices. Then Frontier would be able to connect to any customer. In addition, the presenter stated this is not a Tier 3 service but a pipe of high speed conduit for commercial and business commuting. Lastly, the presenter stated there are maps showing where DSL is available. Nonetheless, if DSL is not available in a particular area, buildout is anticipated to happen soon.

- A consumer group representative asked who pays for the DSL service for telehealth and distance learning.
 - The Frontier presenter stated that normally the medical provider is reimbursed by the patient's health insurance provider to pay for the DSL connection, for telemedicine use only, to the patient. DSL for distance learning is generally paid for by the educational institution or it could be a combination of the institution and the student's family.
- A senior group representative asked if Frontier is promoting legislation that would require insurance companies to cover telemedicine.
 - The Frontier presenter stated that the company supports this type of legislation but it is not actively lobbying for it.

Fioptics presentation questions/comments:

- PUCO staff asked when it is feasible, in urban areas, to replace copper with fiber to the home (FTTH) and whether there is a need to transition to fiber to provide a basic digital phone.
 - The CBT presenter stated that to get to the market quicker, CBT chose to use its legacy copper facilities, where such facilities were viable. The presenter further stated that new build areas will receive fiber but CBT may revisit FTTH where it is currently providing service over copper facilities. Lastly, the presenter stated that there is no need to install FTTH, where viable copper facilities exist, to provide a consumer a basic digital phone service.
 - An industry representative added that there are newer methods where fiber doesn't have to go directly to the home but deeper penetration into the network is needed by installing the fiber to the central office or the "splitter" in the neighborhood. Additionally, the central office does not have to be an actual building but a remote terminal that can expand the availability of advanced services in that area.
- A consumer advocate representative stated that fiber had been installed in her area but is not being used and asked if this could be done for more rural areas.

- The CBT presenter stated that the fiber in that area could be “dark fiber” that has not been activated for use yet and suggested calling the provider who installed the fiber to get more information.
- A consumer group representative added that legacy copper facilities can be used by competitors to offer advanced services to consumers; however, problems arise when the incumbent wants to remove or retire its legacy copper facilities.
- A consumer advocate representative asked if the battery backup was standard when a customer is upgraded to Fioptics.
 - The CBT presenter stated the battery backup was optional with a one-time charge of \$99.
- PUCO staff asked how often a consumer needs to charge or replace the battery, what information is provided to a customer about replacing and/or charging the battery, what percentage of customers opt for the battery and whether cost was a factor in customers not choosing to get the battery backup.
 - The CBT presenter stated it is a D-cell battery with an active shelf life of 3-5 years. The presenter also stated that there is an indicator that beeps when the battery is low. The presenter further stated that when power goes out the battery backup only supplies power for voice service and the customer must have a non-cordless phone to use the voice service. In addition, the presenter stated that the sales rep and installation technicians thoroughly explain the battery functionality to the customer as well as provide the customer with an informational pamphlet. Furthermore, information is available on the company website. Lastly, the presenter stated that about 2% of customers choose the battery back up. Those that do not state that they do not believe it is necessary because they have cell phones which can be charged in the car.

Universal Connectivity and Expansion of Advanced Services Presentation questions/comments:

- PUCO staff asked how internet protocol (IP) interconnection agreements are beneficial in Ohio since these agreements are for carriers who serve more business customers than residential customers.
 - The Ohio Cable presenter answered that cable providers have a large concentration of residential customers and the competitive local exchange carriers (CLECs) serve mostly businesses; but those businesses call residential customers and the agreements affect end-to-end call quality. The presenter also stated that IP-to-IP calls are inexpensive; however, the costs increase when the call is IP to traditional wireline to IP. In addition, the presenter stated that 4G wireless is made of IP which has HD voice for improving call quality, which can

also improve wireline voice quality through interconnection agreements. The presenter further stated that help is needed to validate the importance of IP interconnection agreement and their ability to provide improved features and capabilities as well as reduce costs. Lastly, the presenter stated that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is focusing on the open rulemaking for spectrum and special access and in his opinion, would prefer that states address this issue in this proceeding.

- A consumer advocate representative asked if there was a wide variation in the terms and conditions of service.
 - The Ohio Cable presenter stated that the IP interconnection agreement is structured around the same template as a wireline interconnection agreement, but prices vary. The presenter further stated that the some agreements reference unfiled auxiliary agreements, which may bring more variations in the pricing for IP interconnection compared to wireline interconnection and there should not be a difference.
- An industry representative pointed out that IP-to-IP is seamless when viewed in the context of the broader regulatory framework, but asked about the regulatory framework for traditional ILEC disparity?
 - The Ohio Cable presenter stated traditional regulation has nothing to do with IP technology since it does not change the market share. The presenter also stated that the ILECs are the most difficult to negotiate with since they have the most market power. Lastly, the presenter stated that cable and small ILECs are more willing to negotiate.

Closing remarks:

- PUCO staff stated that the last two meetings have focused on information gathering and sharing; however, part of the collaborative process is to come to a consensus on how to inform the consumers to the benefits and downsides of the transition. PUC Staff indicated that it was time to begin the process of working toward such a consensus. PUC Staff also stated that the Commission is receiving letters from concerned citizens, most of who are from the Appalachian counties, about losing their landlines.
- A consumer group representative stated that since copper is still useful in certain areas and advanced services are being deployed over the copper; it is possible that the ILEC will not withdraw from those areas. The representative also stated that a starting point could be asking the ILECs what their future plans are for those areas where the copper is being re-used.
- An industry representative suggested that the Commission should explain to consumers the process an ILEC must undertake to withdraw basic local exchange service (BLES).

Further, the ILECs can speak to customers as well as part of the consumer education process. The industry representative further stated it is willing to assist.

- PUCO staff suggested, due to the Commission's limited resources, creating a subcommittee/small working group to focus on customer outreach prior to the next meeting. Staff also asked if a general template is needed for customer outreach and stated that the Commission needs the help of the industry to educate and not alarm consumers.
- An industry representative stated that outreach is great but should target consumers in areas where the ILEC may withdraw BLES.
- PUCO staff stated that media articles tend to rile consumers, therefore the collaborative needs to be prepared with a plan in place to be proactive instead of reactive to an ILEC's withdrawal of BLES.
- PUCO staff agreed with the industry representative that a statewide campaign will alarm consumers and that a small working group to discuss big talking points may be a better approach. The Staff also pointed out that all of the companies should relay the same message even if they are doing it in different ways. As such, Staff suggested that the companies come together to communicate a common theme for consumer outreach.
- A PUCO Commissioner stated that the press, per his observation, is causing panic and suggested that the media be educated along with consumers. Additionally, the Commissioner suggested that companies use their relationship with editorial boards to educate the media.
- A consumer advocate representative suggested that customers need to be assured of reliable service.
- The cable representative stated that the landscape of customers when an ILEC actually does withdraw from an area will look different, especially with the CAF goal of reaching unserved customers. Additionally, the representative stated that CAF will identify problem areas and isolate affected consumers.
- A consumer advocate representative suggested the mapping of areas that the CAF process identifies as problems areas.
- An industry representative agreed with the idea of a small working group so that everyone addresses questions/concerns in the same way and suggested that consumers be referred to the companies.
- A Connect Ohio representative suggested that other entities, such as social agencies, validate the message to consumers so that they will not think companies are being self-serving.
- A senior consumer advocate asked if the alternative service will be as affordable as a consumer's current landline service.

- PUCO staff commented that companies do not want to lose consumers and that they must be proactive and not alarm consumers. In addition, Staff stated that there will be consumers who will not want to move to a newer technology and, like digital TV, there will come a time when the move will be necessary. The Staff also stated that the Commission cannot do this by itself; therefore, it is looking to the industry for help to make this a true collaborative process that works. Lastly, the Staff suggested that 6-7 people be involved with the consumer outreach small working group/subcommittee.
- A consumer advocate representative stated that most people will not look at this transition negatively because many want to move to the newer technology but are frustrated by the lack of availability in their area.

Action items

- Tentative topics for discussion/presentation

Next meeting: May 19, 2016 at 1:00 pm.

***Addendum to minutes – answers to questions from VRI representative**

Q: How many telehealth competitors?

A: There are approximately 6 telehealth competitors that VRI sees. Note: this is different than ERS - Emergency Response Systems

Q: (implied by previous question) How many ERS competitors are there?

A: VRI has about 8 primary competitors in the industry

Q: What map services do we use to determine coverage?

A: We currently use OpenSignal and are evaluating RootMetrics

Q: What is the age range distribution of our services?

A: 73 is the average. Eliminating some of the outliers, our age range is between 21 and over 100

Q: What is the percentage of mobile versus fixed cell units?

A: For Ohio, out of the 38% cell units, 13% of those are mobile units