

Customer Service Division Updates

January 2, 2024



DEPARTMENT OF
**PUBLIC
UTILITIES**



Agenda



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- **Eighth month outlook from March 2023 Billing Audit**
 - Estimated Bills / Meter Reads
 - Service Disconnects
 - Service Requests
- **Key Accomplishments**
 - Staffing Levels
 - PromisePay
 - Technology Enhancements
- **Outreach & Engagement**
- **Questions**



Meter Reading Progress

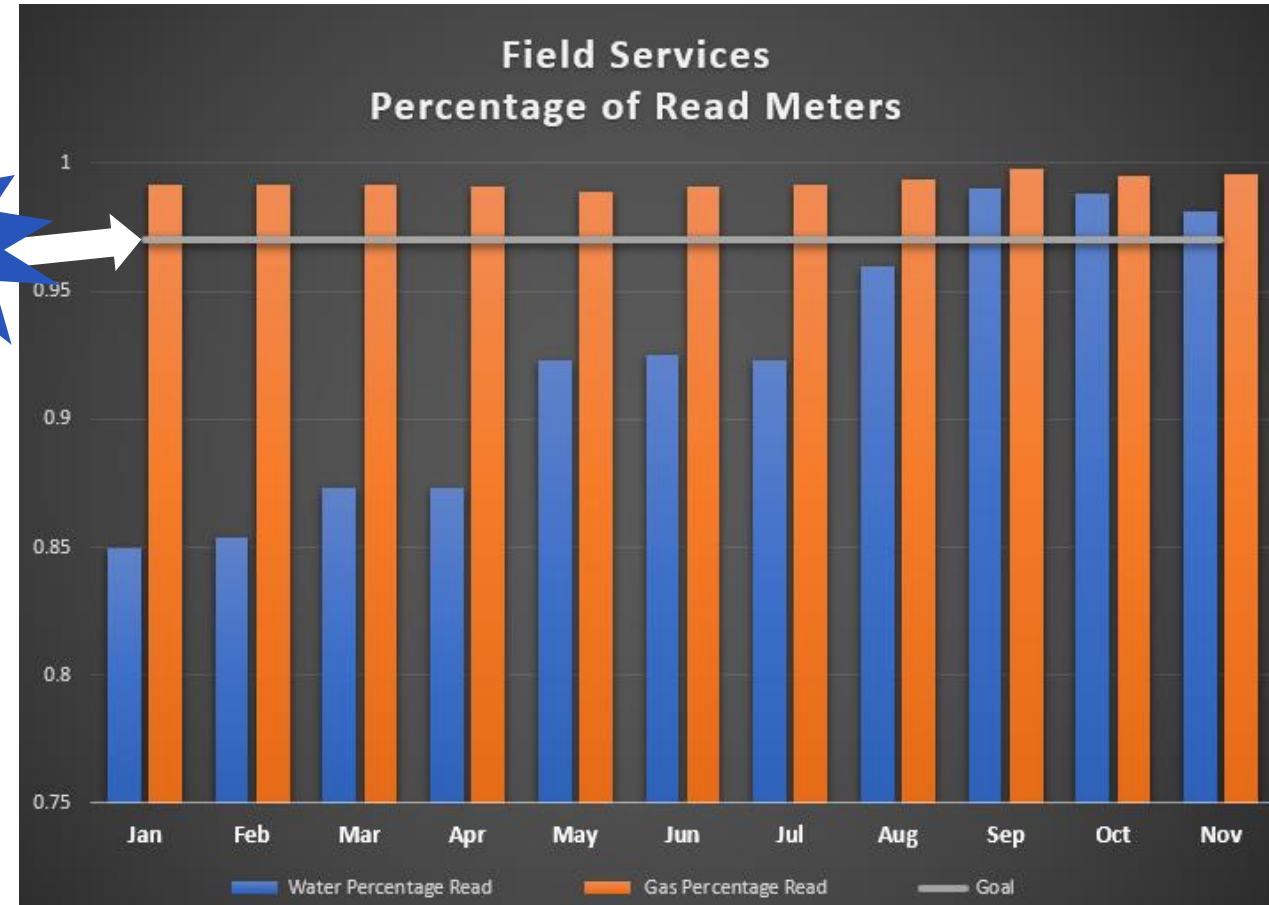


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- Sustained improvement in percentage of actual meters read
- Maintained Reduction in Estimated Billing
- Percentage of meters read exceeds AWWA Standards



AWWA Goal
97%



Creative Solutions = Nearly 20K Successful Outcomes Complete



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Backlog

- 7055 Water Leak Adjustments
- 7084 Customer Transactions including: account changes, adjustments, billing requests, move-in/move-out, etc.

GOAL

- By September 30th: Complete 100% of the Leak Adjustments
- By December 27th: Complete 100% of the Customer transactions

ACCOMPLISHMENT

- Processed 99% or 7,048 Leak Adjustments by October 11th
- Processed an additional 15% or approximately 1,300 Leak Adjustments by December 18th; excess is not included in the backlog
- Over the past 27 weeks, ***DPU's Winning Wednesdays*** has successfully processed more than 11,000 Customer transactions, which includes the 7,084 Customer transactions pending through August 2023

MISSION:
ACCOMPLISHED

Highlights



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■ PromisePay

- ✓ >90 days past due
- ✓ 3 years to pay off
- ✓ No income restrictions

Promise.

Pledged:
\$16,773,342

Collected:
\$5,118,527

Enrollments & Plans

Active Plans

Metrics below pertain to *currently active* plans (not completed or canceled)

9,727

Active Plans

9,460

Residential

267

Commercial

\$1,720

Avg Plan Balance

\$943

Median Plan Balance

92%

Customers who are on track (not past due) with their Promise Pay Plan.

Enrollments, Weekly



Concluded Plans

Completed plans have paid off their Promise plan amount.

Plans can be **canceled** for non-payment, or if otherwise canceled by the customer or utility.

One-Time Payers refers to customers who pay off their balance in one payment, without creating a plan.

1,854

475

1,390

Affordability Programs



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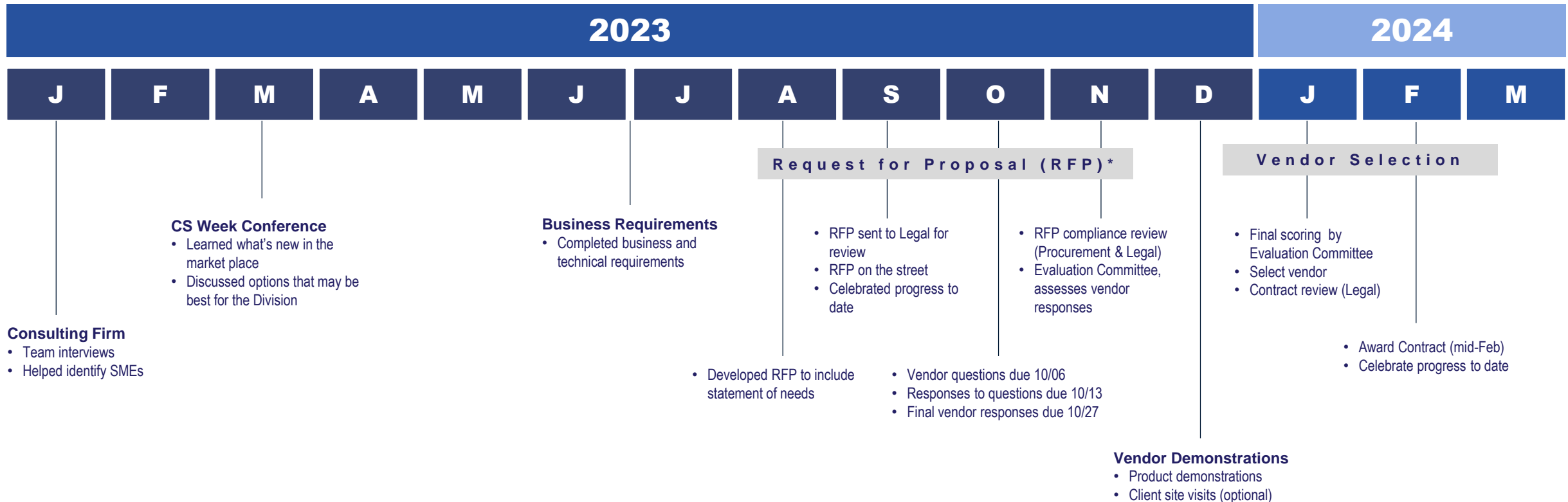
- **LIHWAP** – qualified customers behind on their water bills received **\$2.6M** in assistance.
- **DPU CARES** – customers received more than **\$13.2M** in assistance with their utility bills and avoided late fees and service disconnections.
- **American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)** - **\$8.1M** donated to customers behind on their utility bills.
- **MetroCare Water Program** – approved customers received up to **\$500** per applicant toward their water bill.
- **MetroCare Heat Program** – approved customers received up to **\$500** per applicant toward their heating bill.
- **MetroCare Water Conversation Program** - approved customers received financial assistance for plumbing repairs and the replacement of water-inefficient appliances.
- **SeniorCare Program** –seniors 65 years of age and older in the Richmond metropolitan community took advantage of Winter Service Assurance, no late fees, security deposit waiver program, annual weatherization kit giveaways and third-party notifications.
- **Equal Monthly Payment Plan** – the EMPP budget plan spreads the annual gas bill over 12 months. The estimated monthly payment is based on the previous year's natural gas usage.



CIS Project Timeline



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CIS Project Status



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Request for Proposal (RFP) – Process Overview

- RFP on the streets (publicly posted to accept bids). → **Completed**
- Vendors submit questions. → **Completed**
- Responses to questions are sent to vendor. → **Completed**
- Committee evaluates and selects vendors for presentations. → *In progress*
- Presentations are conducted.
- Vendor selection.
- Contract review (Legal) → Terms and conditions → Negotiations.
- Contract award.

Technology Enhancements



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- Civic Ready: Go-Live projected for December 2023
- Account Lookup Tool: Go-live projected for January 2024
 - Retarget implementation for January 2024 due to the Production code freeze at the end of December 2023

Civic Ready

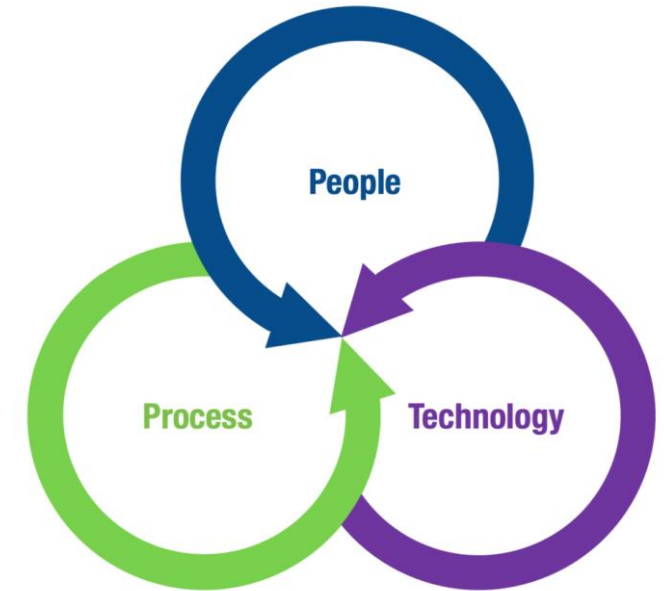


- Provide customer notifications/alerts for planned & unplanned utility work
- Mass notifications for outages
- Full opt in; customers will need to opt out

Account Lookup Tool



- Provide customers' mobile solution to quickly access accounts numbers
- Enhance and increase the use of self-service options



DPU CARES (Ongoing Outreach & Engagement)



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30901-I-0276

March 2023

Dear Valued Customer:

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, most service providers have changed how they conduct business and deliver service to their customers. Despite nationwide changes and challenges, the City of Richmond Department of Public Utilities has maintained its position as a proud partner in helping protect the health and safety of Richmond residents by providing clean and safe drinking water, among other utility services. Due to federal funding made available through the CARES and American Rescue Plan Acts, DPU will continue to distribute \$21.3 million of financial assistance to gas and water customers through calendar year 2023. Over the past year, DPU has taken progressive steps to normalize business operations and will continue on that path with the resumption of disconnections of utility services for non-payment in spring 2023.

Financial Assistance is Available

Resuming disconnections is not an easy decision, nor is it taken lightly. DPU recognizes customers in need of financial assistance and are pleased to announce two new assistance programs – LIHW, PromisePay Payment Plans. These and other programs are outlined on the reverse side of this letter. Customers needing help paying their utility bill are strongly urged to review the available options and accordingly to avoid collection activity, up to and including disconnection of utility service.

Convenient and Flexible Payment Plans

DPU has partnered with PromisePay to offer new flexible payment plans. Customers that are active on existing payment plan with DPU are encouraged to convert to a new payment plan with PromisePay. Residential and commercial customers who are not currently enrolled in a payment plan with DPU, experiencing past due balances are also encouraged to enroll with PromisePay. Benefits include low down payments, longer repayment terms, a variety of payment plan options, automatic payments, reminders and other account notifications all through the convenience of your mobile device.

Challenges and Opportunities

Customer focus, innovation and efficiency are part of DPU's strategic initiatives. The changes resulting from the pandemic have created both challenges and opportunities around these initiatives. Some of the changes have directly impacted service levels, as DPU has been hampered by backlogs created by the pandemic in addition to higher than usual staff vacancy rates. DPU is diligently working through backlogs to address customer issues in a timely manner and seamless fashion. Any customer with concerns about bill is encouraged to contact us at (804) 646-4646 or via email at dpucustserv@rva.gov for an account review. To avoid long hold times you may wish to call on days other than Mondays and Fridays, when volumes are highest.

Longer-term solutions include enhanced hiring and retention practices as well as data-driven decision-making to promote customer satisfaction. Current technologies, including the billing system, phone system and reading process have served us well over the years, but DPU is exploring newer technologies that will create greater efficiencies into processes and enhance the overall customer experience. Stabilizing customer service levels is a high priority for DPU. Thank you for your patience and for allowing DPU the opportunity to make progress in these efforts.

Sincerely,

April N. Bingham, MPA
Senior Director

900 E. Broad Street Richmond, VA 23219 | (804) 646-4646 | www.rva.gov/public-utilities



June 2023

Dear Valued Customer:

Since the March 2023 customer letter, DPU continues efforts to normalize operations in a post-pandemic environment. As we continue to work for you, I'd like to take a few minutes to share a path forward to further improve customer service levels.

► MODIFIED OPERATING HOURS

Effective June 14, 2023, the Department of Public Utilities will modify the Call Center's operating hours to focus on improving and sustaining operational efficiencies and enhancing customer satisfaction levels. Specifically, the modified schedule will enable staff to give their undivided attention to addressing backlogs (i.e., correspondence, adjustments and estimated reading that will help to ensure timely and accurate billing and improve response times. We recognize long hold times, but feel these modifications and efforts will be hugely impactful over the long term.

Here's how the "Modified Operating Schedule" will work:

DPU Call Center's Modified Operating Schedule June 14, 2023 thru September 27, 2023		
Monday and Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday and Friday
Open to the public from 8 am to 5 pm	Open to the public from 8 am to 12 noon	Open to the public from 8 am to 5 pm
Hold times may vary	CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC 12 noon to 5 pm	Hold times may vary
► IMPORTANT		
DPU's 24-hour Logistics Center will remain available 24/7 for emergencies and can be reached at 804-646-4646, select Option 1.		

► STAFF AUGMENTATION

It takes a lot of moving parts to deliver services and it is not without challenges, many of which were amplified by the pandemic. DPU has recently onboarded a team of meter readers and has plans to onboard additional classes of new hires filling various roles across the Customer Service Division. We appreciate your patience as there are a lot of complexities and a large learning curve.

- Letter continues on reverse -

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30901-I-0281

September 2023

Dear Valued Customer:

The Department of Public Utilities remains steadfast in our commitment to improve the overall customer service delivery. Our work remains in progress, and I am excited to share updates since the June customer letter.

Since modifying DPU's Call Center hours on June 14 (i.e., closed to the public every Wednesday 12:00 noon to 5:00 pm), we have been able to deliver refresher training to our tenured staff, on and train several new hires and process over 3,120 customer related transactions and emails. Additionally, the billing team is hard at work and has processed more than 5,900 bill adjustments this same period. We could not have accomplished this without our dedicated staff and customers who have been patient and understanding while we work to recover from the challenges of the pandemic. Our modified operating hours will continue through September 27, 2023.

► FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS: DPU remains committed to providing safe and reliable utility service while creating exceptional value. Resuming disconnections is not an easy decision and is taken lightly. If you have fallen behind on your utility payments, DPU is here to help! Full information and application details on all current programs can be found on our website at www.rva.gov/public-utilities. If you need assistance with any account services, don't delay – email dpucustserv@rva.gov or give us a call today at (804) 646-4646.

- PromisePay Payment Plans** are available for any customer with a past due balance. Visit richmond.promise-pay.com to enroll today with as little as \$10 down and flexible and convenient payment terms up to 36 months.

- BILLING DISPUTES:** DPU will place a courtesy hold on ANY account that is under dispute. email dpucustserv@rva.gov and include "COURTESY HOLD" in the subject line so that we can prioritize your request.

- High Bill Notification Letters** – If your consumption is more than 200% or three times normal consumption, in addition to issuing a bill, DPU may also call or mail you a high bill notification letter with tips on how to check your property for leaks and other recommendations. All water leaks on private property are the responsibility of the owner. For a more comprehensive list of billing adjustments, please refer to the June 2023 customer letter.

- Backlog Response Timeline** – DPU remains focused on resolving backlog requests and has made great strides in this effort. Please allow up to three (3) billing cycles for DPU to process your request. If it has been longer than 90 days since your initial request, please send (or resend your initial email) to dpucustserv@rva.gov and include the word "STATUS" in the subject line so that we can prioritize your request.

- Estimated Bills** – DPU has made great progress in reducing the number of estimated meter reads since February 2023. End of June results show that DPU is producing timely and accurate bills for 92.5% water meters and 99.1% for gas meters. The goal is 97% or better for each service type. If you see BLUE paint or a BLUE meter lid in your neighborhood, thank you for marking our assets so that we can easily locate them when it's time to read the meter.

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30901-I-0288

January 2024

Dear Valued Customer:

Happy New Year and thank you for the continuous opportunity to be of service to you. As we embark upon a new year and a new beginning, I would like to share a few updates about the City of Richmond Department of Public Utilities' progress over the last 12 months as well as what's in store for 2024.

DPU remains committed to its core mission, which is to provide clean, safe drinking water along with sanitary sewer, stormwater management and the distribution of safe and reliable natural gas. For this reason, I start this year with thankfulness for the public servants that show up every day serving you and providing these critical services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Did you know that DPU receives approximately 19,000 incoming calls per month through the call center? This equates to almost 1,000 calls per day. Reducing the average hold time is another top priority for my office in early 2024. While several of the strategies discussed in this letter will aid in this effort, I would like to offer an update on a few key items.

Timely and Accurate Billing – Reducing Estimated Reads
In 2023, we were billing actual meter reads for approximately 85% of our water customers; this translated to an estimation rate of approximately 15%. Through concerted efforts and creative solutions, we have reduced the 15% estimated read rate to exceed industry standards as recommended by American Water Works Association (AWWA), which is plus or minus 3% estimation. To help maintain DPU's ability to provide timely and accurate readings, we encourage customers to keep the meter box free from debris or other forms of obstruction. To learn more about our long-term strategy for meter reading, please see the AMI initiative above.

Customer Inquiries and Escalations
While DPU received and was able to resolve nearly 200 escalations that came through the Councilmembers' staff this past year, we do ask for your continued patience and allow us from one to three billing cycles as we work toward continued progress in tackling our backlog. As a result of our ability to modify operating hours to address backlogs, DPU has been able to respond to approximately 20,000 customer inquiries related to emails, adjustments and ownership changes, amongst other customer concerns. This is exciting progress and I invite you to revisit the September 2023 customer letter for important details about our strategy.

Financial Assistance is Available:
In continued partnership with PromisePay, DPU is currently assisting nearly 10,000 residential and commercial customers with affordable, flexible and interest-free payment plans. More than 1,700 customers have completed plans, whereby they have paid off their PromisePay plan amount. When you establish a payment plan for past due charges, you will avoid late fees and collection activity, to include possible disconnection of services. Don't delay, contact PromisePay today at 804-626-5420 or richmond.promise-pay.com.

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Twitter/X: @RichmondDPU and @DPUSreeNews | Facebook: RichmondDPU



September customer letter

Liaison



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