City of Houston Exception High/Low

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the role of the Exception list and the Utility Customer Service Clerks responsibilities. This paper will discuss high and low consumption and early detection. You will gain valuable knowledge on water usage and how errors are detected before actual billing is completed.

City of Houston Exception High/Low

Introduction

The City of Houston Customer Service Accounting Department is required to render an accurate water bill under Chapter 47-15 of the City of Houston Code of Ordinance. The City of Houston Department of Public Works and Engineering has a system call the Automatic Meter Reading system. The Automatic Meter Reading System is used for water and wastewater billing and monitoring daily water usage. The Automated Meter Reading System is installed at each location where the City of Houston provides water service with a radio receiver and transmitter that allow the meters to be read remotely (City of Houston Website).

The system is set up to transmit readings via telephone lines which then transfer the readings to the Water Customer Information System (WCIS) at the Utility Customer Service Department. There are other methods used for meter readings to obtain an accurate read. The use of handheld devices, van reads, and human reads are used for reading meters too. Meter reading errors such as damage meters, bad ert readings, wrong manual entries, incorrect estimations, meter change outs, and leaks, can cause the consumption to fluctuate and to fail the high/low parameter in place and cause the account to hit a list called the Exception List.

Exception List

The Exception List is a list of all accounts that failed the high/low parameter. There are three types of billings that hit the Exception List High, Low, and Lower than Previous. Once an account appears on the Exception List, a Utility Customer Service clerk will investigate the account to determine if an error was made. The Utility Customer Service clerk will also review

customer billing records for normal usage and average consumption. If an error has occurred the Utility Customer Service clerk needs to make a decision to use the read or request additional verification. Field verification is where a technician will go out to the customer's home and read the meter for a correct meter read. If the technician or the clerk determines a billing or meter error was made, the Utility Customer Service Department will make an adjustment to correct the error. However, if the clerk finds no error, the account will be billed based upon the read that was returned (City of Houston Website).

Each billing cycle, the WCIS system produces the exception report, which is used by the Utility Customer Service, to verify accuracy billed to customers. The exception list is also used as an indicator informing the Utility Customer Service clerk that a possible error could have appeared on a customers account. The clerk investigates the customer account to determine if an error was made. The clerk will review the customers billing records and request the meter be tested for accuracy. If the clerk finds a billing or meter error, the clerk will make the necessary adjustments to correct the error. If an error is not discovered the account will bill at normal usage.

Water accounts that hit the exception list must be investigated, monitored, and reviewed extensively to ensure that the City of Houston is billing the customer for the correct consumption and water usage.

High Consumptions

High consumptions can occur and will appear on the Exception List. Most of the time, customers are not aware of an increase in water usage until they receive a high bill or a Utility

Customer Service clerk calls notifying the account holder of an increase in water usage. High usage can result from a hidden defect, such as underground plumbing or toilet leak. These are the most common unnoticeable water usage that can cause a significant increase in consumption if not discovered in a timely manner. Meter readings sometime come in with a read higher than normal. For example, last month's water usage was 3 thousand gallons and this month's water usage came in at 18 thousand gallons. The difference in water usage is considerably high and will now show up on the Exception list. This is a red flag indicator that something could be wrong at the property or the reading is incorrect. The Utility Customer Service Clerk will contact the customer to see if there is a problem at the property or if the customer can obtain a visual read off the meter. Once a good meter read is retrieved, the account is then adjusted resulting in either a credit or a debit.

Lower consumptions

Low consumptions can appear on the Exception list if a reading comes in lower than the previous read. Various reasons can cause a read to be low, for example, the property is vacant or the meter is inaccessible. Other reasons would be a stuck meter, broken glass, meter read error or ert error. In this case, Utility Customer Service may have to estimate or bill the account low until a good read is verified. Once a good read is retrieved, the account hits the Exception List and the customer will be billed for all usage at one time. The customer is notified and advised to make an average payment until the adjustment can be worked pending two months of good reads.

Sometimes an account can appear on the Exception list due to a meter change out. For example, your meter reads 194, a meter technician changed the meter with a new meter that was reading 2. Now your account will hit the Exception List because your old meter read was 194

and the new meter read 2 which appear lower than previous. Again the Utility Customer Service clerk will examine the account to determine why the usage came in lower than previous. The clerk can look at the account and notice the meter change out and bill the customer accurately.

Meter reading errors occur when an incorrect reading is obtained and used for billing. They usually occur due to a malfunctioning ERT or an incorrect manual entry. In a subsequent month, the error is discovered and the bill must be corrected. The majority of the time, meter read errors are discovered when the customer calls in questioning a high bill, leading to an inspection revealing a mistake. Others are discovered when it hits the Exception List. Another possible error occurs when the wrong meter is read due to cross meters (UCS Accounting Policy Manual).

High Dollar List

The WCIS system produces a report for high dollar amounts. The accounts hit the list if the bill has a current charge that is over $1000, a credit over $500 and all bills whose dollar amounts are higher than prior billing. The accounts on the high dollar list are accounts that have already been billed and are pending releasing of the bills. When examining the high dollar account, the clerk normally look for problems relating to errors, such as overpayments and deposits refunded, reads crossed with a Lawn meter, read crossed with neighbors account, and roll over reads. As with the Exception List, The High Dollar List requires investigation, research, and field verification. After the clerk has complete research on the account, the account will be billed or worked for an adjustment (UCS Accounting Policy Manual).

Turnover and Take out Reads

Turnover reads can be recorded or estimated in error when the register is removed, causing the account to hit the Exception list. For example, if you take out a meter that has a read of 999 and the new meter starts at 6, then this account would show a significant difference in consumption. Therefore, this account has to be reviewed by figuring out the consumption on the register which rolled over and obtained the meters read for the register. This is done by obtaining the consumption on the register which was replaced and the previous months reads for the register in question.

Processing Reads

Some accounts will not require a recheck read. These accounts can certainly be billed as is. However if an account is in need of a recheck read and the meter read is lower than previous then the account has to be billed on the systems average until the recheck read becomes available.

Re-check Reads

Occasionally a recheck read is needed to bill an account correctly. When a meter has turned over or even replaced and a read is not obtained correctly, there is no read to bill the customer. However, we would need a recheck read to obtain information to bill the account. Once a good read is obtained, a Utility Customer Service clerk will have to force bill the account with the correct consumptions. In some occasions, an adjustment may be necessary rather a credit or debit to customer account.

Summary

The Exception List keeps the department functioning and producing accurate billing. Not all readings are accurate and ready for billing. The Exception List gives our customer an early detection by hitting the list informing the accounting clerk that a possible error has occurred.

Conclusion

In closing, the Exception List has prevented many errors and serves as an early detection on all possible errors rather low or high. No matter what the case is, if an account appears on the Exception List, it will be examined and monitored until it is ready for billing. If an account is in error, research and field verification will be requested so that the account can bill correctly.

References:

Utility Customer Service Accounting Policy Manual, Version: 8/12/08

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