Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority Office of the Inspector General

Review of Suspicious Bills Sent to Metro Departments

Case No. 13-AUD-02



August 29, 2012

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Office of the Inspector General 818 West 7th Street, Suite 500 Los Angeles, CA 90017

Date: August 29, 2012

From:

To: Chief Executive Officer Board of Directors

Jack Shigetomi

Deputy Inspector General - Audits

Subject: Review of Suspicious Bills Sent to Metro Departments (Report No. 13-AUD-02)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Audit and Investigations Units of the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) conducted a review of seven suspicious bills received by Metro Departments. On August 1, 2012, the OIG received information from the Division 8 Transportation Manager of an apparent scam bill. The bill was mailed to the division by a company named UST.¹ The bill showed a total amount due of \$425 for "telecom maintenance agreement." Division staff had no prior business relations with UST and had not previously heard of the company. Subsequently, we found that UST sent similar bills to the addresses of six other Metro departments.

Our investigation determined that UST sent scam mailers to Metro departments that look like bills or invoices. We also found that UST has a history of mailing deceptive mailers to businesses and government agencies for telecom maintenance warranty agreements. It is illegal under Federal law to mail a solicitation in the form of an invoice or bill unless it contains a conspicuous disclaimer that states the mailer is in fact a solicitation. The scam mailers UST sent to Metro did not contain the required disclaimer. If even a small percentage of recipients respond to the mailers and remit payment, UST stands to profit because it provides no service.

We promptly notified Metro officials of the scam to preclude any payments to UST. Metro management took immediate action to alert Metro staff of the scam UST bills. We also searched the Financial Information System database and found that no payments had previously been made to UST or US Telecom. In addition, we filed complaints against UST with the California Attorney General, California Department of Consumer Affairs, Federal Trade Commission, US Postal Inspection Service, and the Better Business Bureau.

This review is not an audit; therefore, Government Auditing Standards are not applicable to this review.

¹ According to the Better business Bureau, UST has also used the following alternate names: US Telecom, U.S. Telecom, UST Dry Utilities, Inc., UST Inc., and UST Development, Inc.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Federal Law

Title 39, United States Code, Section 3001, makes it illegal to mail a solicitation in the form of an invoice, bill, or statement of account due unless it conspicuously bears a notice on its face that it is, in fact, merely a solicitation. This disclaimer must be in very large (at least 30-point) type and must be in boldface capital letters in a color that contrasts prominently with the background against which it appears.

The disclaimer must not be modified, qualified, or explained, such as with the phrase "Legal notice required by law." The disclaimer must be the one prescribed in the statute, or alternatively, the following notice prescribed by the U.S. Postal Service: THIS IS NOT A BILL. THIS IS A SOLICITATION. YOU ARE UNDER NO OBLIGATION TO PAY THE AMOUNT STATED ABOVE UNLESS YOU ACCEPT THIS OFFER.²

Scam Mailers

UST mailed scam mailers designed to look like bills to the addresses of at least seven Metro departments (see copy at Attachment A). The scam bills give the impression that service has been rendered and payment is due. All of the scam bills from UST showed the following information:

- "July 25, 2012" as the date on the scam bill.
- "Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority" as the "Bill To" and "Ship To" agency; but each bill showed the street address of the Metro department that received the bill.
- "P.O. Box 970, La Verne, CA 91750-0970" as the address of UST.
- "Telecom Maintenance Agreement" as the description of the services rendered.
- "\$425.00" as the amount due.
- "Net 30 days" as the payment terms.

The front or back of the UST scam bills did not contain the disclaimer required by Tile 39, United States Code, Section 3001.

² Source: United States Postal Inspection Service.

DETAILS OF REVIEW

A. Internet Search

On August 2, 2012, we searched the internet for UST and matched the mailing address, 1-800 number, and fax number on the UST mailer to the website of US Telecom (web address at <u>www.us-telecom.com</u>). However, when we visited this website on August 22, 2012 we found that UST/US Telecom's website is no longer available. A message at this website states: "this site is under construction and coming soon." We also phoned the 800 number on the scam bill mailed to Metro. A recording stated: "Thank you for calling US Telecom...Please wait for the next available operator." After about five minutes, no one answered and the music stopped.

Our search of the internet for information concerning UST/US Telecom found that numerous complaints have been filed against the company for deceptive sales practices. The complaints described deceptive practices that are similar to the scam bills received by Metro.

- On June 6, 2012, the Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection announced an investigation that UST US Telecom "sent invoices to state agencies, and may be targeting municipalities, schools, businesses and other government agencies for a warranty to cover preventive maintenance for technology services...the billing invoices gave no product information and no indication that a contract was in the offering, nor did it include advertising or solicitation purpose, giving the impression that the service was already rendered and payment was now due. The invoices in the amount of \$425 were mailed by UST US Telecom to at least two agencies...The company is listed on numerous fraud alert websites; currently the Department is aware of hundreds of complaints about UST US Telecom and its fraudulent billing practices...UST US Telecom was cited recently by New York and North Dakota for deceptive practices in those states." (See Attachment B.)
- 2. On December 28, 2011, the Better Business Bureau (Eastern Washington, North Idaho and Montana region) issued an alert stating that US Telecom (aka UST) has a history of sending fraudulent invoices to businesses for "maintenance warranties." The alert included a sample copy of the fraudulent invoice, which is similar in appearance to the ones received at Metro. An April 10, 2012, update to the alert stated: "We have received multiple calls from businesses across the nation who report that the \$425 solicitation invoices they have received show US Telecom's address has changed to: P.O. Box 970 La Verne, CA 91750-1970.³ As of April 10, 2012, the solicitation invoices still do not

³ The sample UST bill, dated November 25, 2011, on the Better Business Bureau website showed the following address for UST: 305 N. Sacramento Avenue Ontario, CA 91764.

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state anywhere that they are a solicitation for business, and the company has a total of 261 complaints filed against them." (See Attachment C.)

The Better Business Bureau servicing the Los Angeles area reported that UST (US Telecom) has an "F" rating. The primary reason for this rating is that in the last 12 months, the Better Business Bureau received over 520 complaints against UST for advertising/sales issues and billing issues concerning mailers designed to look like an invoice.

- 3. We found numerous postings/complaints about UST posted by individuals on the TrustLink⁴ website. The postings about UST indicated that other people have received similar scam invoices from UST (see Attachment D). Examples of comments are:
 - "UST Billing Scam Like the Arkansas poster, we at the City of Wichita in Kansas have received multiple bills from this company. They do not say anywhere that it is a solicitation."
 - "Scam fake invoice from US-Telecom I received an invoice from these people dated 2/15/12. Same deal \$425 for maintenance. Never heard of them before."
 - "\$425 Scam My company received exactly what all of these other complainants are stating. \$425 for telephone maintenance. It's a scam.
 - "UST 'cold' invoice Received an invoice for telecom maintenance/warranty. Have never heard of the company."

B. Search of Financial Information System Database

We searched the Financial Information System to determine whether any Metro payments were made to UST, US Telecom, or the address on the scam bills. Our search of the FIS database did not find any payment to the company.

C. Accounts Payable Procedures

Three of the suspicious bills were sent by Metro Departments to Accounts Payable, and were subsequently referred to the OIG. These bills were not processed for payment. They were rejected because a valid purchase order was not listed on the bill.

⁴ TrustLink is an online platform that gives consumers the opportunity to rate and make comments about businesses that they have dealt with.

D. Notification to Metro Officials of the Scam Bills

We initiated the following actions to alert Metro staff about the scam bills being sent by UST.

- 1. On August 3, 2012, we notified the Controller of the scam UST bills so that she could alert Accounts Payable staff in the event an UST bill is submitted for payment. On the same day, the Controller responded and said that she has notified Accounts Payable staff.
- 2. On August 3, 2012, we coordinated with the Deputy Chief Information Officer to send a message out to all Metro staff to alert them of the fraudulent UST bills to preclude processing and paying such bills. On August 8, 2012, the Deputy Executive Officer Human Resources sent a message to all Metro email recipients advising them of the scam UST bills and providing the following information on how to avoid being a victim of such a scam:
 - Watch for solicitation disguised as bills,
 - Review all bills and invoices carefully,
 - Be especially wary of any bills from unfamiliar companies,
 - Know or have a list of the authorized vendors,
 - Verify all bills with the person who authorized and/or received the purchase, and
 - Forward all suspicious bills to the OIG office for investigation.
- 3. On August 6, 2012, we notified the Contract Administrator who oversees the Metro Purchase Card Program of the scam UST bills. On August 7, 2012, the Contract Administrator sent an email to all Purchase Cardholders advising them of the scam UST bills.

E. OIG Filed Complaints with Consumer Protection Agencies

On August 8, 2012, the OIG filed the complaints on behalf of Metro with the following agencies concerning the scam UST bills sent to Metro departments:

- California Department of Consumer Affairs
- California State Office of the Attorney General
- United States Postal Inspection Service
- Federal Trade Commission
- Better Business Bureau servicing the Los Angeles area

On August 9, 2012, the Public Inquiry Unit of the California Attorney General's Office responded to our complaint and stated: "We will write to the company that you have a complaint against and request a response from them."

The Postal Inspection Service advised us that they entered the information we provided into their national Fraud Complaint System.

CONCLUSION

The OIG investigation found that UST sent at least seven scam mailers to Metro departments that look like bills for an amount due of \$425 each. Our search of public websites found that numerous complaints have been filed against UST for deceptive practices, and the company has been cited by the states of New York and North Dakota for deceptive practices.

We promptly notified Metro officials of the scam to preclude any Metro payments to UST. Metro management took immediate action to alert all Metro staff of the scam UST bills. We also searched the Financial Information System database and found that no payments have previously been made to UST or US Telecom. In addition, we filed complaints against UST with the Federal and State agencies.

Attachment A

Copy of Suspicious Bill

P.O. E La Ve	BOX 970 rne, CA	com needs. 91750-0970			
	IE# 800-2		Date 7/25/2012	-	rence # 29655
FAX#	626-205	1133	//25/2012	102	29655
ill To		Ship To			
1 Gateway I Los Angeles	Plz 5, CA 90012	1 Gateway	les County Metro y Plz les, CA 90012-3		sportation Au
Web Site	Э	This warranty covers preventative maintenance on al	l telecom	Term	S
www.us-teleco	om.com	system equipment, Including; Telephone instruments, and cabling. This is not for services rendered	, switches	NET 3	DAYS
Quantity		Description		Rate	Amount
01	TELEC	COM MAINTENANCE AGREEMENT		\$425.00	\$425.00
		REJECTED DUP OTHER D DATE FROM DEPT NO/INVALID FO	ł		

		Total	\$425.00
JUL 3 0 2012	JUL OV LOW		

Copy of Suspicious Bill



Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection

CTgov State of Connecticu	e 🔘	Governor Dannel P. Malloy	Search
D	PEPARTMENT OF CONSUM	MER PROTECTIO	N
	Home About Us	Publications Forms	Contact Us
William M. Rubenstein Commissioner	PRESS RELEASE		E
Consumers	Department of Consumer Protection 165 Capitol Avenue		William M. Rubenstein Commissioner
Licensees and Applicants Information A - Z	Hartford, Connecticut 06106		OR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Laws & Regulations	June 6, 2012		OR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
News Room Useful Links	Department of Consumer Prote	ection Launches Investigatio	n
	into UST – L	IS Telecom	
PVP	Company allegedly sending bogus		
Annulate Meditaring Program	HARTFORD, June 6 – The Department of Consumer F company that has sent invoices to state agencies an businesses and other government agencies, for a wa technology services. Department of Consumer Prote warning organizations to be alert to this and similar	d may also be targeting municipaliti rranty to cover preventative mainte ction Commissioner William M. Rube	es, schools, nance for enstein is
Receive Updates by e-mail @-ALERTS Email Notices	"We have been notified by State agencies that receiv working with UST or US Telecom for warranty service Rubenstein said today. "We've discovered that UST North Dakota for deceptive practices in those states.	es, and are unfamiliar with them as - US Telecom was cited recently by	vendors,"
for Licensees	The billing invoices gave no product information and nor did it include advertising or solicitation purpose, rendered and payment now due. See sample at <u>this</u>	giving the impression that the service	
WE CAN'T ALERT YOU	In Connecticut, invoices in the amount of \$425 were agencies: the Department of Motor Vehicles and the been sent to school districts and municipal agencies, was identified.	Department of Education. Invoices i	nay have also
f	"Businesses, schools and local and state government or US Telecom, and should not send payment," Rube an investigation into this company for its deceptive p	nstein said. "Meanwhile, my office	
	The company is listed on numerous fraud alert websind hundreds of complaints about UST – US Telecom an		are of
	UST Development, Inc. does business as UST and US principal place of business at 305 North Sacramento the mailing address of PO Box 970, Laverne, Californ	Avenue, Ontario, California, but is c	
	To help organizations avoid being defrauded by these Consumer Protection advises fiscal staff to:	e or any bogus invoices, the Departr	nent of
	 Watch for solicitations disguised as bills. Fa "This is not a bill." Review all bills and invoices carefully. Be es unfamiliar with. Know the vendors you use regularly, and k Make sure you have effective internal contr 	specially wary of any from companie eep a list.	s that you are
	 Verify all invoices with the person who auth Anyone who has received an "invoice" from UST or L unsolicited services is encouraged to notify the Depa dcp.tradepractices@ct.gov or call 1-800-842-2649. 	norized the purchase. IS Telecom for unordered, undeliver	
		nd-	

		
Image: Normal State State Image: State State Image: State State Image: State State Image: State	US Telecom Fools With Fraudulent Invoices - BBB News Center Page 1 of 2	
Totel Print RSS Bookmark & Share Image: A image	US Telecom Fools With Fraudulent Invoices	
December 28, 2011 A local business has informed our BBB that an F-rated company, US Telecom (aka UST ostopoment, Inc.) based in Ontario, CA is soliciting in our region. US Telecom has a history of sending fraudulent involces to businesses for "maintenance warranties" in the amount of \$175.00 to \$30.00. See below for an example of the solicitation. These involces are solicitations for businesses, not an actual bill. You are not obligated to pay this amount to US Telecom/UST powerlopment, Inc. This company has had 139 complaints filed in the pay type: and many have gone unanswered. Per Title 29, United States Code, Section 3001, it is illegal to mail a solicitation in the form of an involce, Bill, or statement of account due unless it conspicuously bears a notice on its face that it is, in fact, merely a solicitation. The they have received show US Telecom/Telecom/UST between address has changed to: P.O. Box 970 La Verne, CA 91750-1970. As of 4/10/2012, the solicitation invoices 310 do NOT state anywhere that they have raceived show US Telecom's return address has changed to: P.O. Box 970 La Verne, CA 91750-1970. As of 4/10/2012, the solicitation invoices 310 do NOT state anywhere that they stare a solicitation for businesse, and the company has a total of 262 complaints filed against them. BB Recommendation: File a complaint with your state Attorney General as well as with your local US Postal Inspector. To find the Postal Inspector that services your area, visit this website. To see further information about US Telecom/UST Development, Inc., see their BBB Business Acted has the services. If you have any questions about these invoices, file free to contact Chelsea Dannen, PR & Media Specialist at 509-232-0529 or cdannen@spokane.bbb.org.	12/27/2011	
A local business has informed our BBB that an F-rated company, US Telecom has a history of sevelopment, Inc.) based in Ontario, CA is soliciting in our region. US Telecom has a history of satisfies, not an actual bill. You are not obligated to pay this amount to US Telecom/UST Development, Inc. This company has had 139 complaints filed in the past year, and many have go unanswered. Per Title 29, United States Code, Section 3001, it is illegal to mail a solicitation in the form of an invoice, bill, or statement of account due unless it conspicuously bears a notice on its face that it is, in fact, merely a solicitation about 2004 (1990). To face the solicitation invoices they have received multiple calls from businesses across the nation who report that the \$425.00 solicitation invoices they have received show US Telecom's return address has changed to: P.O. Box 970 La Verne, CA 91750-1970. As of 4/10/2012, the solicitation invoices still do NOT state anywhere that they are a solicitation for business, not an a total of 1262 complaints filed against them. BBB Recommendation: File a complaint with your state Attorney General as well as with your local US Postal Inspector. To find the Postal Inspector that services your area, visit this website. To see further information about US Telecom/UST Development, Inc., see their BBB Business Review. If you have any questions about these invoices, feel free to contact Chelsea Dannen, PR & Media Specialist at 509-232-0529 or cdannen@spokane.bbb.org.	Tools Print RSS Bookmark & Share A A A	
 Development, Inc.; based in Ontario; CA is soliciting in our region. US Telecom has a history of signo, See below for an example of the solicitation. These invoices are solicitations for businesses, not an actual bill. You are not obligated to pay this amount to US Telecom/UST Development, Inc. This company has had 139 complaints filed in the past year, and many have gone unanswered. Per Title 29, United States Code, Section 3001, it is illegal to mail a solicitation in the form of an invoice, bill, or statement of account due unless it conspicuously bears a notice on its face that it is, in fact, merely a solicitation. April 10, 2012 Update: We have received multiple calls from businesses across the nation who report that the \$425.00 solicitation invoices they have received show US Telecom's return address has changed to: P.O. Box 970 La Verne, CA 91750-1970. As of 4/10/2012, the solicitation invoices still do NOT state anywhere that they are a solicitation for businesses, and the company has a total of 262 complaints filed against them. BBB Recommendation: File a complaint with your state Attorney General as well as with your local US Postal Inspector. To find the Postal Inspector that services your area, visit this website. To see further information about US Telecom/UST Development, Inc., see their BBB Business Review. If you have any questions about these invoices, feel free to contact Chelsea Dannen, PR & Media Specialist at 509-232-0529 or cdannen@spokane.bbb.org. 	December 28, 2011	
262 complaints filed against them. BBB Recommendation: File a complaint with your state Attorney General as well as with your local US Postal Inspector. To find the Postal Inspector that services your area, visit this website. To see further information about US Telecom/UST Development, Inc., see their BBB Business Review. If you have any questions about these invoices, feel free to contact Chelsea Dannen, PR & Media Specialist at 509-232-0529 or cdannen@spokane.bbb.org.	 Development, Inc.) based in Ontario, CA is soliciting in our region. US Telecom has a history of sending fraudulent invoices to businesses for 'maintenance warranties' in the amount of \$175.00 to \$350.00. See below for an example of the solicitation. These invoices are solicitations for business, not an actual bill. You are not obligated to pay this amount to US Telecom/UST Development, Inc. This company has had 139 complaints filed in the past year, and many have gone unanswered. Per Title 29, United States Code, Section 3001, it is illegal to mail a solicitation in the form of an invoice, bill, or statement of account due unless it conspicuously bears a notice on its face that it is, in fact, merely a solicitation. April 10, 2012 Update: We have received multiple calls from businesses across the nation who report that the \$425.00 solicitation invoices they have received show US Telecom's return address 	
local US Postal Inspector. To find the Postal Inspector that services your area, visit this website. To see further information about US Telecom/UST Development, Inc., see their BBB Business Review. If you have any questions about these invoices, feel free to contact Chelsea Dannen, PR & Media Specialist at 509-232-0529 or cdannen@spokane.bbb.org.	still do NOT state anywhere that they are a solicitation for business, and the company has a total of	
Review. If you have any questions about these invoices, feel free to contact Chelsea Dannen, PR & Media Specialist at 509-232-0529 or cdannen@spokane.bbb.org.		
	Review. If you have any questions about these invoices, feel free to contact Chelsea Dannen, PR &	
http://spokane.bbb.org/article/us-telecom-fools-with-fraudulent-invoices-31614 8/1/2012		5
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	http://spokane.bbb.org/article/us-telecom-fools-with-fraudulent-invoices-31614 8/1/2012	

0 Answers	\$425.00 SCAM	
	My company recieved exactly what all of these other complaints are stating. \$425 for	
	telephone maintenance. It's a SCAM. I called and spoke with a live person that stated this is an "offer", It certainly does NOT look like and offer.	1
	» Bookmark » Send a Message	
	Posted on 4/6/2012 Was this review? Useful (31) Funny (0) F Flag this Review	
Ann B.		
1 Review	Invoice scam	
0 Answers	I received an invoice for \$425 for Telecom Maintenance Agreement. I never heard of this	
	company and no where on the invoice does is mention this if something you CAN have. It's a scam.	
	» Bookmark » Send a Message Posted on 3/29/2012	
	Was this review? Useful (15) Funny (0) Flag this Review	
Bryan A.		
1 Review	UST "cold" invoice	
O Answers	Received an invoice for telecom maintenance/warranty. Have never heard of the company.	
	Someone should stop them. » Bookmark » Send a Message	
	Posted on 3/20/2012 Was this review? Useful (11) Funny ⁽⁰⁾ ⊯ Flag this Review	
Thomas G.	Scam - fake invoice from us-telecom.com	
0 Answers		
	I received an invoice from these people dated 2/15/12. Same deal - \$425 for maintenance. Never heard of them before. The La Verne PD will not take reports over the phone but if you get an invoice from us-telecom.com you should go to your local police and ask them to do a courtesy report about this, give them a copy of the invoice and ask them to send it via fax to 0 the file where DBits and eventue them 200 F00 750 for 200 750 for the them to the send it via fax to	
	City of La Verne Police Department Fax 909.596.7158 Bookmark » Send a Message Posted on 3/13/2012	
	Was this review? Useful (7) Funny (0) 🏲 Flag this Review	
Ray T.		
1 Review 0 Answers	UST BILLING SCAM	
	Like the Arkansas poster, we at the City of Wichita in Kansas have received multiple bills from this company. They do not say anywhere that it is a solicitation as required by USC 39:3001, and that the disclaimer must be in 30 point font.	
	They sent us these 'invoices' for \$425 00 for telephone maintenance. Total and complete scam. They seem to be targeting state and local governments and school agencies lately.	
	» Bookmark » Send a Message	
	Posted on 2/21/2012 Was this review? Useful (5) Funny (0) F Flag this Review	
Ann H.	UST billing scam	
0 Answers	This company has sent several bills to public schools in Arkansas. We received 2 bills of	

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