

**Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of)	
)	
Birch Communications, Inc.)	Complaint Nos. 14-S4315901
)	14-S4607929
)	14-S4662980
Complaints Regarding)	14-S4696320
Unauthorized Change of)	276469
Subscriber's Telecommunications Carrier)	544922

ORDER

Adopted: December 22, 2015

Released: December 30, 2015

By the Deputy Chief, Consumer Policy Division, Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau:

1. In this Order, we consider the complaints¹ alleging that Birch Communications, Inc. (Birch) changed Complainants' telecommunications service providers without obtaining authorization and verification from Complainants in violation of the Commission's rules.² We conclude that Birch's actions did result in unauthorized changes in Complainants' telecommunications service providers and we grant Complainants' complaints.

2. In December 1998, the Commission released the *Section 258 Order* in which it adopted rules to implement Section 258 of the Communications Act of 1934 (Act), as amended by the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (1996 Act).³ Section 258 prohibits the practice of "slamming," the submission or execution of an unauthorized change in a subscriber's selection

¹ See Appendix.

² See 47 C.F.R. §§ 64.1100 – 64.1190.

³ 47 U.S.C. § 258(a); Telecommunications Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-104, 110 Stat. 56 (1996); *Implementation of the Subscriber Carrier Selection Changes Provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996; Policies and Rules Concerning Unauthorized Changes of Consumers' Long Distance Carriers*, CC Docket No. 94-129, Second Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rule Making, 14 FCC Rcd 1508 (1998) (*Section 258 Order*), *stayed in part*, *MCI WorldCom v. FCC*, No. 99-1125 (D.C. Cir. May 18, 1999); First Order on Reconsideration, 15 FCC Rcd 8158 (2000); *stay lifted*, *MCI WorldCom v. FCC*, No. 99-1125 (D.C. Cir. June 27, 2000); Third Report and Order and Second Order on Reconsideration, 15 FCC Rcd 15996 (2000), Errata, DA No. 00-2163 (rel. Sept. 25, 2000), Erratum, DA No. 00-2192 (rel. Oct. 4, 2000), Order, FCC 01-67 (rel. Feb. 22, 2001); Third Order on Reconsideration and Second Further Notice of Proposed Rule Making, 18 FCC Rcd 5099 (2003); Order, 18 FCC Rcd 10997 (2003); Fourth Report and Order, 23 FCC Rcd 493 (2008). Prior to the adoption of Section 258, the Commission had taken various steps to address the slamming problem. See, e.g., *Policies and Rules Concerning Unauthorized Changes of Consumers' Long Distance Carriers*, CC Docket No. 94-129, Report and Order, 10 FCC Rcd 9560 (1995), *stayed in part*, 11 FCC Rcd 856 (1995); *Policies and Rules Concerning Changing Long Distance Carriers*, CC Docket No. 91-64, 7 FCC Rcd 1038 (1992), *reconsideration denied*, 8 FCC Rcd 3215 (1993); Investigation of Access and Divestiture Related Tariffs, CC Docket No. 83-1145, Phase I, 101 F.C.C.2d 911, 101 F.C.C.2d 935, *reconsideration denied*, 102 F.C.C.2d 503 (1985).

of a provider of telephone exchange service or telephone toll service.⁴ In the *Section 258 Order*, the Commission adopted aggressive new rules designed to take the profit out of slamming, broadened the scope of the slamming rules to encompass all carriers, and modified its existing requirements for the authorization and verification of preferred carrier changes. The rules require, among other things, that a carrier receive individual subscriber consent before a carrier change may occur.⁵ Pursuant to Section 258, carriers are absolutely barred from changing a customer's preferred local or long distance carrier without first complying with one of the Commission's verification procedures.⁶ Specifically, a carrier must: (1) obtain the subscriber's written or electronically signed authorization in a format that meets the requirements of Section 64.1130; (2) obtain confirmation from the subscriber via a toll-free number provided exclusively for the purpose of confirming orders electronically; or (3) utilize an independent third party to verify the subscriber's order.⁷

3. The Commission also has adopted liability rules. These rules require the carrier to absolve the subscriber where the subscriber has not paid his or her bill. In that context, if the subscriber has not already paid charges to the unauthorized carrier, the subscriber is absolved of liability for charges imposed by the unauthorized carrier for service provided during the first 30 days after the unauthorized change.⁸ Where the subscriber has paid charges to the unauthorized carrier, the Commission's rules require that the unauthorized carrier pay 150% of those charges to the authorized carrier, and the authorized carrier shall refund or credit to the subscriber 50% of all charges paid by the subscriber to the unauthorized carrier.⁹ Carriers should note that our actions in this order do not preclude the Commission from taking additional action, if warranted, pursuant to Section 503 of the Act.¹⁰

4. We received Complainants' complaints alleging that Complainants' telecommunications service providers had been changed without Complainants' authorization.¹¹ Pursuant to Sections 1.719 and 64.1150 of our rules,¹² we notified Birch of the complaints and

⁴ 47 U.S.C. § 258(a).

⁵ See 47 C.F.R. § 64.1120.

⁶ 47 U.S.C. § 258(a).

⁷ See 47 C.F.R. § 64.1120(c). Section 64.1130 details the requirements for letter of agency form and content for written or electronically signed authorizations. 47 C.F.R. § 64.1130.

⁸ See 47 C.F.R. §§ 64.1140, 64.1160. Any charges imposed by the unauthorized carrier on the subscriber for service provided after this 30-day period shall be paid by the subscriber to the authorized carrier at the rates the subscriber was paying to the authorized carrier at the time of the unauthorized change. *Id.*

⁹ See 47 C.F.R. §§ 64.1140, 64.1170.

¹⁰ See 47 U.S.C. § 503.

¹¹ See Appendix.

¹² 47 C.F.R. § 1.719 (Commission procedure for informal complaints filed pursuant to Section 258 of the Act); 47 C.F.R. § 64.1150 (procedures for resolution of unauthorized changes in preferred carrier).

Birch responded.¹³ Birch states that authorization was received and confirmed through third party verification (TPV) in each case. We have reviewed the TPVs that Birch submitted with its responses. A carrier cannot switch only part of a service. In each case, however, the verifier confirms only part of interLATA service, namely, state-to-state and international. The verifier does not confirm intrastate interLATA service, *i.e.*, no confirmation regarding service between each of the state's LATAs. Therefore there was no authorization for interLATA service.¹⁴ As we emphasized in the *Fourth Report and Order*, "any description of the carrier change transaction...must not be misleading" and verifiers should convey explicitly that "the consumers will have authorized a *carrier* change, and not for instance an upgrade in existing service."¹⁵ We find that Birch's actions were in violation of our carrier change rules, and we discuss Birch's liability below.¹⁶

5. Birch must remove all charges incurred for service provided to Complainants for the first thirty days after the alleged unauthorized changes in accordance with the Commission's liability rules.¹⁷ We have determined that Complainants are entitled to absolution for the charges incurred during the first thirty days after the unauthorized changes occurred and that neither the Complainants' authorized carrier nor Birch may pursue any collection against Complainants for those charges.¹⁸ Any charges imposed by Birch on the subscribers for service provided after this 30-day period shall be paid by the subscribers to their authorized carrier at the rates the subscribers were paying to their authorized carriers at the time of the unauthorized changes of telecommunications service providers.¹⁹

6. Accordingly, IT IS ORDERED that, pursuant to Section 258 of the Communications Act of 1934, as amended, 47 U.S.C. § 258, and Sections 0.141, 0.361 and 1.719 of the Commission's rules, 47 C.F.R. §§ 0.141, 0.361, 1.719, the complaints filed against Birch Communications, ARE GRANTED.

7. IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that, pursuant to section 64.1170(d) of the Commission's rules, 47 C.F.R. § 64.1170(d), Complainants are entitled to absolution for the charges incurred during the first thirty days after the unauthorized change occurred and neither

¹³ See Appendix.

¹⁴ We note that the Complainants allege that the carrier's sales representative misrepresented the nature of the transaction. Birch did not rebut these allegations in its response.

¹⁵ See *Fourth Report and Order*, 23 FCC Rcd 493 (2008)(emphasis added); see also 47 C.F.R. § 64.1120(c)(3)(iii).

¹⁶ If any Complainant is unsatisfied with the resolution of this complaint, such Complainant may file a formal complaint with the Commission pursuant to Section 1.721 of the Commission's rules, 47 C.F.R. § 1.721. Such filing will be deemed to relate back to the filing date of such Complainant's informal complaint so long as the formal complaint is filed within 45 days from the date this order is mailed or delivered electronically to such Complainant. See 47 C.F.R. § 1.719.

¹⁷ See 47 C.F.R. § 64.1160(b).

¹⁸ See 47 C.F.R. § 64.1160(d).

¹⁹ See 47 C.F.R. §§ 64.1140, 64.1160.

the Birch nor the authorized carriers may pursue any collection against Complainants for those charges.

8. IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that this Order is effective upon release.

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION

Nancy A. Stevenson, Deputy Chief
Consumer Policy Division
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau

APPENDIX

<u>INFORMAL COMPLAINT NUMBER</u>	<u>DATE OF COMPLAINT</u>	<u>DATE OF RESPONSE</u>
14-S4315901	July 3, 2014	August 8, 2014
14-S4607929	August 7, 2014	September 16, 2014
14-S4662980	July 18, 2014	October 29, 2014
14-S4696320	October 28, 2014	December 5, 2014
276469	May 6, 2015	June 3, 2015
544922	September 22, 2015	November 9, 2015