Esther Peterson to Senator James O. Eastland, 22 December 1978

Esther Peterson

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Dear Senator: 

Each year almost a million citizens write to or call the federal government in Washington to complain about a problem in the marketplace or with a government service. As the President's Special Assistant for Consumer Affairs, one of my tasks is to determine how well federal agencies are handling the complaints, to identify opportunities for improving responses, and in particular to get the citizen views these complaints represent incorporated into policymaking.

Recently Technical Assistance Research Programs, Inc. (TARP), under contract with the U. S. Office of Consumer Affairs, made an on-site evaluation of changes in handling consumer complaints with 22 federal agencies in follow-up to 1975-76 evaluations of the same agencies. Attached is a copy of this report and a related press release. Please note especially pages ES-9, 10 and 11 of the Executive Summary, which provide a "report card" of the performance of each agency based on 15 evaluation factors.

Early in 1979, TARP will provide additional reports on the effectiveness of complaint handling by business, state and local governments, and voluntary consumer organizations. Also early in '79, a report on the state of the art of consumer complaint handling in the United States will be published by my office.

Sincerely,

Esther Peterson
Special Assistant to the President for Consumer Affairs
FYI: REPORT CARD ON COMPLAINT HANDLING BY 22 FEDERAL AGENCIES FINDS SUBSTANTIAL IMPROVEMENT, SIGNIFICANT LAGGING

"Federal consumer complaint handling is getting better -- it isn't perfect but we're working on it," Esther Peterson, the President's consumer advisor said today. Peterson released a follow-up assessment by an independent contractor of how well 22 Federal agencies handle consumer complaints which found "substantial improvement" since an original survey of the same agencies in 1975-76.

At a press conference to release the results of this latest phase of an ongoing long-term study, Peterson cautioned that "despite report cards showing general and, in some cases, dramatic improvement, over a third of the agencies were found to lag significantly in some or many aspects of effective and efficient consumer complaint handling."

The recheck of agency complaint handling systems was part of a four-year, $430,000 study by Technical Assistance Research Programs, Inc. (TARP) under a contract awarded in 1974 by the U.S. Office of Consumer Affairs (OCA) following an open competitive bid process. Of the 22 agencies examined in the Federal phase of the study, 15 are regulatory agencies (e.g., the Food & Drug Administration, the Federal Trade Commission) and seven others provide goods, service or benefits directly to consumers (e.g., the National Park Service, the U.S. Postal Service).

Other phases of the study focus on consumer complaint handling by state and local governments, private and voluntary organizations, and industry. TARP's evaluations of complaint handling in these other sectors will be submitted in early 1979 as part of its final report to OCA. Also due in early '79 is a TARP/OCA analysis of the state of the art of consumer complaint handling, based on the data gathered for the study.

Peterson emphasized the independent nature of the TARP study, noting that TARP cited the Office of Consumer Affairs for limited progress in setting standards for and coordinating Federal complaint handling. She pointed out that since the President appointed her

(more)
Director of OCA in August, however, she has asked the heads of the agencies surveyed on complaint handling for their response to the report and specific plans to improve their deficiencies. OCA's responsibilities in monitoring and improving Federal consumer complaint handling are a major focus of her recently published reorganization of the office, Peterson said, and added that the TARP study shows that "Federal agencies could handle consumer complaints better with more efficient systems -- they don't necessarily need more people."

Peterson also pointed out that, at President Carter's request, her office is presently developing recommendations to strengthen all Federal consumer programs, including complaint handling. TARP's findings will be considered for inclusion in her recommendations to upgrade Federal consumer offices.

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TOP TEN WRITTEN COMPLAINTS RECEIVED BY U.S. OCA
JANUARY - AUGUST 1978

1. AUTOMOBILES 34.0%
2. MAIL ORDERS 10.6%
3. BANKING & CREDIT 5.1%
4. HOUSING 5.1%
5. APPLIANCES 4.7%
6. PUBLICATIONS/PUBLISHERS 3.6%
7. INSURANCE 3.6%
8. FOOD 2.6%
9. HOME ENTERTAINMENT EQUIPMENT 2.1%
10. RECREATION & TRAVEL 1.9%
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