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Northampton telecom consultant's watchful eye results in \$1.3 million payment by Verizon to settle allegations of overbilling

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NORTHAMPTON — As a telecommunications consultant, it's Rob Chambers' job to analyze phone bills and contracts for accuracy and to ensure his clients are getting the best deals possible.

It was that attention to detail by Chambers and his partner, Jim Levey, of Chambers Advisory Group in Northampton that resulted in a \$1.3 million settlement between Verizon New England Inc. and the state attorney general's office to resolve allegations of overbilling government entities on a state contract.

"It was a pattern that we saw and brought it to the attorney general's attention," Chambers said Wednesday in a phone interview from his King Street office. "We were pleased the attorney general saw some value in this, and there's a large pool of Verizon state contract customers who have the potential to get some benefit out of this."

Verizon has a contract with the state to provide telephone services to government entities at specific rates. According to the attorney general, the company invoiced certain state contract customers for a variety of items and services at rates higher than those permitted by state contract between September 2006 and October 2012.

These services included local calling usage, regional toll service, flat rate business lines, flat rate trunks,

and business listings, according to a complaint filed in Hampshire Superior Court that is now resolved.

In addition to the \$1.3 million, the settlement requires Verizon to make additional payment offers to cities and towns and other related entities impacted by the alleged overbilling. It was not clear Wednesday whether any local government entities are among those who would receive restitution, but Chambers said he previously resolved similar problems of overbilling by Verizon with the Amherst schools and the city of Easthampton in Hampshire County.

In a statement, Verizon said the company and the attorney general had "agreed to settle certain billing issues under a now-expired state contract."

"We have a long history of providing reliable, cost-efficient services and promptly addressing issues that can arise under agreements as complex and wide-ranging as the state's blanket contracts," the company said. "Verizon values its relationship with the Commonwealth and looks forward to continuing it for years to come."

According to a complaint filed in Hampshire Superior Court in September 2012 that was impounded until this month, Chambers' firm was able to obtain documentation of Verizon's alleged pattern of overbilling and was "privy to admissions by Verizon representatives that Verizon was aware of the overbilling and failed to take timely remedial action."

Although Chambers said his firm eventually resolved billing disputes and questionable charges that involved his clients, there was growing concern about the many other government entities on the state contract with Verizon that his company could not help.

"We felt there were more entities that might be receiving these charges," Chambers said. "It made sense to look at it on a broader scale. We have hundreds of clients but there are thousands of entities that could be on the state contract."

In working with Verizon on the issues, the company in several cases admitted error in most cases when dealing with Chambers Advisory Group, but to Chambers' knowledge, Verizon did not issue across-the-board refunds to the state and continued to bill Massachusetts and other entities fees that were not permitted by law, according to court documents.

In several cases, the company attributed illegally charged fees to "administrative error," according to the lawsuit filed by Chambers and the attorney general in Hampshire Superior Court under the False Claims Act. Asked whether he believed all of the allegations against Verizon were the result of administrative error, Chambers said his company was not in a position to say what the reasons were for Verizon's billing practices under the state contract in question.

"We're just looking at the bills that we have," he said.

The attorney general's office is contacting relevant towns, cities, and other governmental entities regarding the settlement, and anyone with questions about the settlement should contact the office at 617-963-2228.

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