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### CUB works out \$20 credit with phone carrier

By Jon Van

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Illinois residents who sign up for a long-distance phone plan that charges about 3 cents a minute for calls can get a \$20 incentive to do so, the Citizens Utility Board said Monday.

It is an unexpected bonus associated with the consumer advocacy group's campaign to help people trim their phone bills. CUB counselors and its Web site were sending so many new customers to Pioneer Telephone, a small long-distance carrier based in Portland, Maine, that the firm informed CUB that it was eligible for sales commissions.

"We said that we couldn't take money for advising consumers," said David Kolata, CUB's executive director, "but we did negotiate a deal to pass along more savings to consumers."

Illinois customers who dial 1-877-492-6878 to get Pioneer's service should ask for the CUB discount, which is a \$20 credit. Changing long-distance carriers can trigger a \$9 charge from local phone carrier AT&T, which the \$20 more than compensates for, Kolata said. Soon CUB will add a Web site to enable consumers who go online to get the bonus.

Kolata said that CUB has found that 85 percent of Illinois consumers who talk to its counselors can trim their phone bills without any noticeable decline in service.

"If you're paying more than \$25 a month for phone service," Kolata said, "you probably can save money by changing your plan."

Since it started the phone service counseling program about a year ago, more than 11,000 customers have used CUB's online service to change phone service plans, and thousands more have done so by calling CUB's hotline at 1-866-688-4282, he said.

CUB's phone savings center was launched last year with the help of a three-year grant of \$2.5 million from AT&T. In 2006, AT&T sought to reduce state regulation of its residential phone service, a move that consumer groups initially opposed. But CUB supported the change once it negotiated several concessions from AT&T, including establishment of basic consumer choice plans with frozen low rates and funding for a campaign to publicize those rates.



Moving to a low price long-distance carrier like Pioneer is one of several CUB recommendations to trim phone bills. One consumer, Laura M. Webb, who lives on Chicago's Southwest Side, said she spends hours each month chatting with friends and relatives in other cities.

"Before I talked to CUB, I usually paid \$30 to \$40 a month for long distance," Webb said. "Now, it's never more than \$10, and more like \$4 or \$6."

She said her local bill, once averaging nearly \$50 a month, is now usually less than \$30.

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