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Customers: U.S. Energy Savings cost them big

BBB gets 258 complaints on natural gas supplier

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When the natural gas bill for Charles Schepel's home in Cedar Lake went through the roof this winter, he took a closer look at his NIPSCO bill.

In fine print it said: "You enjoy fixed price gas supply and peace of mind from U.S. Energy Savings."

He had never heard of U.S. Energy Savings. He had never heard of the man U.S. Energy Savings said gave it his account information two years ago.

He also found out U.S. Energy Savings was charging him almost twice as much for natural gas as NIPSCO.

At one time he figured it might have cost him up to \$1,600.

"OK, 1,600 bucks won't kill me," Schepel said recently at the sign and graphic design business he owns. "But it pissed me off. That's not how I do business. That's not how they should do business."

Schepel is not the only one complaining. The Better Business Bureau has received 258 complaints about U.S. Energy Savings. The Citizens Utility Board has received hundreds more in Illinois.

"We're just trying to get the information out there so if people get a call from the company they check before signing anything," said Mike Coil, BBB of Northern Indiana president.

When contacted by The Times on Monday, U.S. Energy Savings said it wanted all questions e-mailed. It did not answer any of eight questions regarding customers' complaints by a deadline Monday for this story.

U.S. Energy Savings Inc., of Chicago, is an approved energy supplier under the NIPSCO Choice program. It is also an approved supplier for Nicor's Customer Select program.

NIPSCO confirmed that it was contacted by Schepel. The utility responded to his complaint by giving him an \$889 credit when it was found another customer had given NIPSCO incorrect information about their own account, according to NIPSCO spokesman Nick Meyer.

"We take any complaints we receive very seriously," Meyer said.

Schepel said it is hard to believe what happened was a mistake. At one point he was told the contractor who built his home was in on the switch.

He built the home himself.

Both NIPSCO Choice and Nicor Customer Select let customers sign up with independent energy suppliers for their natural gas.

U.S. Energy Savings and most of the others offer customers the chance to "lock in" their price for natural gas.

A number of customers have told The Times their fixed price with U.S. Energy Savings ranged from \$1.13 to \$1.37 per therm. Nicor currently charges 87 cents per therm and NIPSCO 73 cents.

Most of the complaints received by the Better Business Bureau allege U.S. Energy Savings marketed its products in a deceptive manner.

The Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission does not have jurisdiction over energy suppliers like U.S. Energy Savings, according to Mary Beth Fisher, a commission spokeswoman.

Schepel said he paid his NIPSCO bills for a year-and-a-half before realizing it was U.S. Energy Savings that was charging him for the natural gas.

He and his wife, Judy, are still waiting to see if U.S. Energy will cancel the \$150 exit fee it charges for getting an account changed back to NIPSCO.

"My main spin on this is this happened to us, and we have a friend this happened to," Judy Schepel said. "We just want other people to be aware and check their bills."

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