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Natural gas marketer faces new complaint

By Steve Daniels March 03, 2008

(Crain's) — Three consumer groups filed a new complaint Monday with state utility regulators against U.S. Energy Savings Corp., a natural gas marketer whose selling practices have been a source of controversy in the past.

In their petition, the Citizens Utility Board (CUB), AARP Illinois and Citizen Action/Illinois asked the Illinois Commerce Commission to order U.S. Energy to stop some of its tactics, eliminate high fees the firm charges customers to get out of their contracts and fine U.S. Energy for any violations.

In addition, the groups ask the commission to consider pulling U.S. Energy's certification to operate in the state. "We believe at a minimum U.S. Energy should have its certification temporarily removed," says David Kolata, executive director of CUB.

CUB negotiated a settlement with U.S. Energy in 2006 in which the firm agreed to cancel some customer contracts without charging penalties. But since then, CUB says, it has received more than 1,500 complaints.

The consumer groups say U.S. Energy's door-to-door sales force sells multi-year natural gas supply contracts to homeowners that lock them into prices that almost always are higher than what they would pay if they stayed with their traditional utility. They allege the sales people make deceptive promises of savings and provide other misleading information.

"I didn't think it was possible, but U.S. Energy's behavior has actually gotten worse," Citizen Action/Illinois co-director Lynda DeLaFargue said in a release. "U.S. Energy has misled consumers — many of them seniors and people who don't speak English — to sell some of the worst gas deals in Illinois history."

In a statement, U.S. Energy denied the groups' allegations and said it would fight them.

"We have tens of thousands of customers paying less than the current utility rates — all because they signed up with USESC," co-CEO Ken Hartwick said in the statement.

The company says it has systems to maintain quality and ensure that customers understand what they are being offered.

Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan filed a civil lawsuit in Cook County Circuit Court three weeks ago seeking to stop the alleged sales practices, halt contracts and reimburse customers, and assess civil penalties against the firm for violations.

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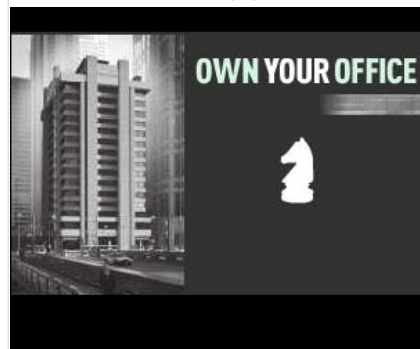


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