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Group to host 'clinic' on phone bills

By Debra Pressey

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CHAMPAIGN – It just amazes Jim Chilsen how many people pay for things on their phone bills that they never use.

He was even one of those people once.

Years ago, he said, he was paying his phone company a monthly insurance fee to cover potential repair costs to his interior phone wiring.

"And what makes it even worse, I was living in an apartment building," said Chilsen, spokesman for the Citizens Utility Board, a Chicago-based utility consumer watchdog organization.

Chilsen said his organization expects to find all kinds of unnecessary costs that can be trimmed from phone bills at a free "phone bill clinic" being held in Champaign.

At this clinic, taking place from 4 to 7 p.m. Thursday at the Champaign Public Library, people can bring their phone bills to be examined by an expert from CUB who will advise them on potential savings.

The phone clinics are typically well-attended, and last year people who came saved an average \$200 a year on their bills, Chilsen said.

"People are really hungry for good information, and they don't really get it from their phone companies," he added.

The biggest culprit CUB representatives often find is a phone bill bloated with services people don't need or use, Chilsen said.

That wiring insurance called "Line-Backer," for example, is unnecessary to most consumers because line repairs are needed only about once every 20 or 30 years, according to CUB.

Another pitfall is paying too much for a calling plan when you don't use all the calls and services that come with it, CUB has found.

"We get people renting their phone still," Chilsen said. "I just talked to a gentleman this morning who was paying for voicemail and he had an answering machine."

CUB contends anyone paying more than \$25 to \$30 a month for phone service is overpaying.

And nobody should settle for paying more than a nickel a minute for long-distance calling, Chilsen said.

At the clinic next week, the organization will share information about the best long-distance plans and how to claim an automatic \$20 credit that CUB negotiated with one of the bargain providers, Pioneer Telephone.

Information will also be available about the three new money-saving local calling plans called Consumer's Choice that were designed by CUB and are being sold by AT&T.

Meanwhile, some other money-saving tips from CUB: – Make your cell phone your money-saving friend, Chilsen advises.

Use your extra minutes to make long distance calls at no extra charge.

Leave your cell phone nearby when you're on your land-line phone, so people can call your cell phone when they get a busy signal, and you won't need call-waiting service.

– Don't pay for voicemail. Buy an answering machine.

– Don't pay for directory assistance.

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