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Illinois consumers can take advantage of low phone rates

Dear Editor,

When I tell consumers across the state that they probably shouldn't be paying more than \$25-\$30 a month for phone service, they're shocked. But it's true.

In fact, the average Illinois consumer could save hundreds of dollars a year by taking a few steps.

No. 1, sign up for a low-cost Consumer's Choice local-calling plan. Under a legal settlement, AT&T is forced to market plans designed by the Citizens Utility Board (CUB) to save most customers money. No. 2, get cheap long-distance service.

Now, those savings could be even bigger, thanks to a CUB-negotiated \$20 credit attached to one of the best long-distance plans we've ever seen: Pioneer Telephone's "Rate Buster."

Most long-distance companies have high rates and slap you with a monthly fee, even if you don't make a single call. However, Pioneer's rate is just 2 to 3 cents per minute for most Illinois consumers. (Others may have to pay a still-reasonable 3.3-4.9 cents per minute.) A 99-cent monthly fee only applies if you want a paper bill (as opposed to an online bill) - and then only in months you make less than \$15 worth of long-distance calls.

CUB's ongoing analysis of the long-distance market consistently shows Pioneer as the best deal for most callers. When the Portland, Maine-based company discovered that our analysis led to new Illinois customers, Pioneer notified CUB that we were eligible for compensation.

Seeing a golden opportunity, we said "no thanks," but asked if Illinois consumers could get the money instead.

The resulting \$20 credit translates into more than 11 hours of free long-distance calls for most callers - enough to cover several months, even a year, of bills.

To get the credit, Illinois consumers should call Pioneer at 1-877-492-6878 and ask for the "CUB discount." For information on how to cut your local bill as well, call CUB's Phone Savings Center, at 1-866-688-4282.

-David Kolata

Executive Director

Citizens Utility Board