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WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM? NOT GETTING RESULTS? WE CAN HELP

### Persistence key to finding sympathetic ear at cell companies

After hours on hold, customer gets firm to waive cancellation fees

Jon Yates

What's Your Problem?

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Judging by the number of e-mails that jammed the Problem Solver's mailbox over the past week, many of you feel Donna Lee Spray's cell-phone induced pain.

Spray was featured in last Wednesday's What's Your Problem? after T-Mobile pulled the plug on her daughter's cell phone because of excessive roaming calls. Molly Spray, 19, had started college last summer in Winona, Minn., where there are no T-Mobile cell towers.

Although the Sprays had a family plan that advertised free roaming and nationwide coverage, Molly Spray's calls were unprofitable, T-Mobile said.

After the Sprays complained, T-Mobile allowed the family to drop its plan without paying a cancellation fee.

Several wrote that you were not afforded such a courtesy.

The Problem Solver received complaints about virtually every other mobile phone company, on topics ranging from poor quality phones to uncaring customer service representatives. But the bulk of you leveled your anger at T-Mobile.

Some had better success dealing with the telecommunications giant than others.

Count Ann Barth of Wheaton among the success stories. Barth e-mailed the Problem Solver last week that T-Mobile was dropping service to her daughter, Samantha.

Like Molly Spray, Samantha Barth, 19, moved away for college and her new home—Cedar Rapids, Iowa—did not have a T-Mobile cell tower.

Barth's first e-mail said T-Mobile was dropping Samantha's line without fees, but other family members on the plan would have to pay \$200 each to drop out. Barth said that would cost the family \$600.



Days later, Barth wrote back to say she had called a different number at T-Mobile, 877-275-1735, and the customer service representative reached there agreed to waive the fees.

She passed the phone number along in hopes of helping others.

Barth said there was one caveat: getting through was not easy.

"I called nearly every day last week," Barth said. "I would be on hold for 45 to 60 minutes and then have to hang up because I don't have all day to spend on hold."

Barth said she finally got through at 6 a.m. Saturday after a 30-minute wait and got help.

"I felt a huge sense of relief," Barth said.

The Problem Solver called the T-Mobile number Barth gave Tuesday morning and, like Barth, was placed on hold. A much less patient person, he gave up after five minutes.

He had much better luck with the Citizens Utility Board, which offers tips for cell phone users.

CUB spokesman Jim Chilsen said consumers often have little recourse when dealing with cell companies because they're not tightly regulated.

"It's like the wild, wild West," Chilsen said.

Cell phone customers need to read the fine print before they sign a contract, Chilsen said, and should avoid mall kiosks that offer cell phone plans. Some kiosk dealers charge a separate cancellation fee, meaning if you stop your service before the contract is over, you pay two fees—to the company and to the dealer.

He suggests buying phones and cell service from company stores, or directly from the carrier's Web site.

For more tips on how to avoid problems with your cell phone, visit [www.citizensutilityboard.org](http://www.citizensutilityboard.org), click on "Telecommunications." Once there, scroll down to find "Rules to Live by for Cell-phone Callers."

### *The checks have arrived*

When The Problem Solver last checked with the Midwest Brain Injury Clubhouse in March, it had received \$2,000 of the \$5,000 Gianfranco Grande had promised to repay.

Last week, the final check arrived, meaning Grande has paid in full.

The Clubhouse was featured in a February column after it paid Grande and his business, Philantropia, \$6,000 to help raise money. Clubhouse executive director Deborah Giesler complained that Grande had not raised a penny, and the small Chicago non-profit wanted its money back.

Grande promised the Problem Solver he would repay \$5,000 in five monthly checks.

He kept his word.

Giesler said things are looking up at the Clubhouse, which provides clients with brain injuries a place to

socialize, heal and develop new skills. The agency has received about \$2,500 from What's Your Problem? readers, and is looking to develop partnerships to provide help for soldiers returning from Iraq.

"It's all good," Giesler said.

#### *HAVE A PROBLEM?*

*E-mail us your story, providing as many details as possible, to [yourproblem@tribune.com](mailto:yourproblem@tribune.com) or write to What's Your Problem, Newsroom, Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611. Please include your name and a way to contact you. We cannot respond to everyone, but we'll get to as many as we can and publish the results on Wednesdays and Sundays.*

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