

CUB urges Illinoisans to reduce phone bills

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While Capitol Hill debates ways to jump-start the economy, Illinoisans have a potential economic stimulus package worth more than \$1.5 billion in their own bulging telephone bills.

The Citizens Utility Board announced that the vast majority of Illinois households are overpaying on their telephone calls. Making simple changes to their local, long-distance and wireless services could cut their bills by more than \$575 a year. This cut could give the state a \$1.5 billion boost, which is equal to a 14 percent tax cut.

"We basically want to show that the vast majority of Illinois consumers are overpaying on their phone bills, but by taking simple steps, they can save a lot of money," said Jim Chilsen of the Citizens Utility Board.

"Our main message is to pick up your bills, look over them and give us a call. We can give you some tips on how to lower monthly payments," Chilsen said.

"It's surprisingly simple to make deep cuts in your calling costs, without sacrificing service, that will reap significant savings and help spark the economy," Citizens Utility Board Director David Kolata said in a news release.

The Citizens Utility Board used U.S. Census data, Illinois tax figures, and state and federal telephone statistics to estimate that the extra cash would be pumped into the economy if most consumers in the state stopped paying extra phone expenses.

"Locally, many people are charged for too many calls and unused services. There is a good chance that you can cut down on your local plan," Chilsen said. "Calling plans are designed for high-volume callers, and most people don't use the phone that much."

Additional savings could come from dropping unnecessary services, such as Line-Backer, a plan covering wire repairs.

"Line-backer costs \$7 a month, and the service usually only happens every 20 or 30 years," Chilsen said.

The group is not only worried about local calls, they look at both long-distance and wireless services, as well.

"Usually, the flat monthly fee for long-distance service is too high and, on average, people don't make nearly enough calls for that fee," Chilsen said.

The group found one of the best long-distance deals in the nation, with the Maine-based Pioneer Telephone's "rate buster" plan. It charges 1.9 cents to 2.7 cents a minute. The 99-cent monthly fee is waived for consumers who get their bills e-mailed to them.

After discovering the offer, the Citizens Utility Board negotiated a one-time \$20 credit to any

Illinois consumer who signs up for it.

There are also many services wireless customers pay for that they do not use or need.

"We have a new free tool that analyzes your wireless bills," Chilsen said. "You have to be a customer of one of the top five cell phone companies, including AT&T, Sprint, Verizon, US Cellular or T-Mobile. The consumer can upload their bill, and we will analyze it and give tips on how to cut back on expenses."

Within seconds of uploading the bill, the tool can recommend better calling plans and catch charges, such as roadside assistance and insurance, which consumers may not need.

The consumer group found potential average savings for most consumers of \$308.28 per year. This translates into statewide savings of \$710.4 million.

The group announced that it was launching "The Right Call" campaign during a news conference. This campaign will include public service announcements and a statewide tour to educate consumers about money-saving opportunities in the phone market.

"It's depressing to think people are overpaying by \$1.5 billion, but the good news is there are simple ways to cut back on your bill," Chilsen said.

The Citizens Utility Board is Illinois' leading nonprofit utility watchdog organization. After being in business for 25 years, the group has saved consumers more than \$10 billion by helping to block rate hikes and secure consumer refunds.

"Bad phone bills are bad for our bank accounts and bad for the economy," Kolata said. "The good news is consumers have the power to cure Illinois' epidemic of high phone bills by making relatively simple changes that can drastically cut their costs and spark the economy."