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Hung up over phone bill?

Consumers can call CUB for help

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Consumers beware: If you're paying more than \$25, you're probably paying too much.

No, it's not your weekly intake of Starbucks Frappuccinos or the gallons of gas you just pumped into your tank.

Consumers paying more than \$25 a month on their land line phone services are probably getting ripped off, according the Citizens Utility Board, and there are plenty of advocates looking to help curb these costs.

CUB is Illinois' leading nonprofit utility watchdog organization -- created by the Illinois legislature in 1983 to represent the interests of residential and small-business utility customers. Since then, CUB has saved consumers more than \$10 billion by helping to block rate hikes and secure refunds.

On Wednesday, a room full of senior citizens sat anxiously with phone bills in hand at Aurora University to learn first-hand from experts on how to slash their phone bills and deal with less-than-helpful associates.

"He's spent hours on the phone with AT&T (trying to resolve issues)," a silver-haired women lamented about the frustrating efforts of her husband to straighten out a bill.

CUB consumer advocate Sarah Moskowitz said she feels the audience's frustration.

"Even after working nine years for CUB, I still get heart palpitations when I have to call the phone companies about my bill," Moskowitz said.

Changing services or packages also leaves a sour feeling in the stomach of Sarah Lauzen, wife of state Sen. Chris Lauzen, R-Aurora, who co-sponsored the clinic. The uncertainty of whether the decision to switch is a good one can be heightened by cluttered company sales pitches and pushy associates.

With kids heading to college, Lauzen said she is feeling the pressure of the phone companies and the economy. She's constantly looking for ways to save.

Moskowitz rattled off dozens of ways utility consumers can cut costs -- and most of them began with understanding what exactly they are being charged for to begin with.

"Comcast does a great job of muddling down their bills," she said.

The bundling of services often makes it impossible to decipher what you're being charged for, she said -- "It robs you of your ability to shop around."

When bundling, consumers often are paying for services they'll likely never use.

"Most people don't need lots of everything, like 3-way calling and automatic callback," Moskowitz said.

Line-Backer fees, or inside-wire maintenance plans, can cost consumers almost \$100 a year. These monthly fees act as insurance to cover the repair of phone wires inside the walls of your home. These problems, however, are rare, Moskowitz said, and happen only once every 20 to 30 years on average.

"They'll try to scare you into keeping it," Moskowitz said. "But we'll tell you exactly what to ask for. ... We'll arm you with the information to be bold and firm."

For years, CUB's legal team has fought before state and federal regulators and in the courts for lower rates and better services from Illinois natural gas, electric and telephone companies, Moskowitz said.

"We say, give the utilities one chance to get it right," Moskowitz said. "If you can't get through after an hour, or they don't give you a call back, call us and we'll get through for you."

The CUB's consumer hotline, 800-669-5556, will be answered by consumer advocates who know how to sort out utility issues Moskowitz said.

"Our job is to answer your questions," she said.

Consumers often will benefit from using one service, like AT&T for local calls, and another cheaper service, like Pioneer, for long distance, or local toll calls, she said.

Moskowitz said while she doesn't normally advocate for specific companies, Pioneer's long-distance rates are clearly the best.

"We've been watching them for years, and they offer a \$20 credit just for signing up," she said.

CUB also strives to save cell phone users cash as well. By using CUB's online tool, The Cellphone Saver, consumers can analyze wireless bills and reduce costs.

"Most people are paying too much for phone service," CUB Executive Director David Kolata said.

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