

[Back to regular view](#) [Print this page](#)

Study warns cell phone users of hidden expenses

Insurance, roadside assistance not worth cost, group says

[Comments](#)

August 18, 2009

BY [SANDRA GUY](#) sguy@suntimes.com

Cell-phone users should beware hidden expenses in bills such as 411 calls, roadside assistance and phone-insurance coverage, a Citizens Utility Board study revealed Monday.

"Many people already have roadside assistance through (AAA Motor Club), the hand-set insurance is largely useless, and there are plenty of free directory-assistance services such as 1-800 FREE 411 and 1-800-Info-Fast," said CUB Executive Director David Kolata.

CUB's report, called "Surviving the Cell-phone Jungle," took data from the organization's year-old Web tool, CUBCellphoneSaver.com, which analyzes cell-phone users' bills and spits out items where they could save money. Users download PDF copies of their cell-phone bills to the Web site. Those PDFs are free from cell-phone carriers, Kolata said.

Here's what the data showed:

- • 73.4 percent of the 6,985 phone bills analyzed by CUBCellphoneSaver.com from June 2008 through April could have saved on average \$27.61 a month, or \$331.32 a year.
- • 9.3 percent of the bills had "overage" penalties -- fines for going over a plan's allotted minutes. Those penalties averaged \$40 per bill.
- • The average user wasted 439 minutes a month, or 46 percent of their paid minutes. That's almost seven-and-a-half hours -- or what CUB characterized as "the equivalent of a phone conversation lasting longer than a flight from Chicago to Reykjavik, Iceland."
- • Miscellaneous fees and surcharges that carriers levied accounted for 13.4 percent of the cell-phone charges, surpassing what the Cellphone Saver Web site users paid in government taxes and fees on their bills.

Verizon spokeswoman Carolyn Schamberger said the carrier believes its billing "is very clear."

Verizon, headquartered in Basking Ridge, N.J., changed its billing system a year ago to ensure that customers understand their bills, Schamberger said.

"We will continue to evaluate our billing to make sure it's as clear as possible for our customers," she said.

AT&T spokeswoman Meghan Roskopf said, "We're always focused on bringing value to our customers" and agreed that customers should review their bills carefully.

"Customers with questions about their bills are encouraged to call customer care or visit their local store," Roskopf said.

Some tips from CUB:

- • Choose the smallest calling plan feasible and monitor bills carefully so you don't pay for unused minutes.
- • Do the same for text-messaging plans.
- • Don't pay to insure your cell phone. The coverage is so limited as to be useless.

- • Never dial 411 from your cell phone due to the average cost of \$1.54 per call. Use free services.
- • Ask your cell-phone carrier to remove extra charges for items you don't recognize or didn't order.
- • Consider pre-paid cell plans if your carrier doesn't provide a plan that matches your needs.

[The largest cell phone bills: OECD's findings](#)

From FierceWireless

[Save money on your phone bills](#)

From Thrifty Mommy

The views expressed in these blog posts are those of the author and not of the Chicago Sun-Times.