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Watchdog group touts cell-phone savings

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Cell phone users are wasting several hundred dollars a year on unused minutes and services they'll never use. At least, that's the argument being made by the Illinois Citizens Utility Board, a utility watchdog group.

The group released a report this week, "Surviving the Cell-phone Jungle," that says Illinois consumers could cut their bills an average of \$331 a year by changing calling plans and cutting back things such as roadside assistance services.

And while the group came to its conclusions by studying some 7,000 Illinois cell phone bills, the findings apply beyond the state, spokesman Patrick Deignan said at a briefing Wednesday in East St. Louis.

"We see no reason why it would be any different from state to state," Deignan said.

Here are some findings based on the billings by the top five carriers, AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, U.S. Cellular and Verizon:

— Unused minutes: The majority of the bills included unused minutes. The average user wasted 439 minutes a month, or 46 percent of paid minutes.

— Text messaging: Most bills with text message plans showed even more waste, with 65 percent of the monthly quota unused.

— Costly extras: More than half of the users were overpaying by an average of \$10.64 a month, spent on extras such as expensive 411 information calls, roadside assistance and forms of insurance.

— Miscellaneous fees: The report also was critical of miscellaneous fees and surcharges "that appeared to have no other purpose than to fatten profits."

Of course, cutting back on minutes could actually end up costing some users more money if they aren't careful. Most cell phone companies, after all, charge significant fees for those minutes that exceed a plan's limit.

Deignan said users who switch to a smaller plan should keep that in mind: "Monitor your bills closely for the first few months to make sure you're on the right plan."

The nonprofit, established by the Illinois legislature in 1984, also offers an online tool, Cellphone Saver, that's supposed to help consumers figure out if they're on the right plan. It can be found on the organization's website at www.citizensutilityboard.org.

The report has drawn little response from wireless carriers, who have chosen not to address its findings. But several carriers, including AT&T and U.S. Cellular, said they work with customers to find plans that are right for them.

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