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Illinoisans overpaying for cellphone use, study finds

CUB analysis cites mismatch of users' needs, plans

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Even as more people go wireless for their telephone needs, a Chicago utility watchdog agency said Monday that cell-phone users continue to pay for calling time they don't use.

The yearlong analysis of 11,921 lines showed that Illinois callers, on average, overpaid on 66 percent of the 4,404 bills studied, and paid \$359.64 per year unnecessarily, according to the Citizens Utility Board report, issued Monday. The 4,404 bills averaged 2.7 lines per month.

The analysis covered one year of statistics, from August 2009 through July 2010.

Illinois callers were often poorly matched with their cell-phone plans, CUB said, resulting in nine out of 10 callers on individual plans paying for 450 minutes or more even though most never used more than 300 minutes a month. Thirty percent used less than 100 minutes, the study showed.

The analysis was made possible because of CUB's Web tool, *CUBCellphone Saver.com*, analyzes cell phone users' bills and spits out items where they could save money.

CUB also found that its online Cellphone Saver users paid \$23,066.48 per month, on average, on potentially useless extras such as insurance and directory assistance.

CUB suggests cell-phone customers:

- Check for billing errors;
- Figure out whether insurance coverage is worth it;
- Use toll-free services rather than paying for directory assistance.

CUB also recommends that cell-phone companies give customers an alternative to roll-over minutes, since most people don't come close to using their minutes anyway, and send customers text alerts when they are at risk of exceeding their allotted minutes in a given month.

The news comes at the same time that the adoption of smartphones and wireless-enabled technologies jumped 50 percent in June from a year ago, with data use growing by 49.8 percent, according to a report by CTIA, the wireless association.

K. Dane Snowden, vice president of CTIA's external and state affairs, said wireless carriers

"are more than happy to work with their customers to ensure they are on the 'right' cell plan."

"The U.S. wireless industry is the most competitive and innovative in the world," Snowden said. "About 66 million Americans, or nearly 25 percent of all wireless consumers, took advantage of these competitive choices and changed carriers last year so they could get the newest, innovative products and services and competitive rate plans."

A Sprint spokesman said Sprint customers may track their own cell-phone use on their device and online, and those with contracts can change their plans at will.

A U.S. Cellular spokeswoman said customers may use a free "overage" protection plan so that they get a text message when they reach 75 percent of their allotted minutes or text messages, and again at 100 percent.

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