



CITIZENS UTILITY BOARD

Fighting for Illinois Consumers

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CUB LAUNCHES ONLINE CENTER TO HELP CHICAGO-AREA CONSUMERS AVOID RIP-OFFS FROM UNREGULATED NATURAL GAS SUPPLIERS

WATCHDOG SEES 65% INCREASE IN COMPLAINTS/QUESTIONS ABOUT SUPPLIERS

Faced with a 65 percent increase in complaints and questions about unregulated natural gas suppliers this winter, the Citizens Utility Board (CUB) on Thursday launched an online help center to warn consumers about bad natural gas deals being peddled door-to-door, over the phone, or via mail.

Consumers can get a free copy of “CUB’s Guide to Avoiding Natural Gas Rip-offs” at www.CUBHelpCenter.com. The publication gives consumers tips on avoiding bad deals, an informational poster to warn neighborhoods of door-to-door rip-offs, and a chart that compares alternative supplier offers with utility rates.

“All Chicago-area consumers should look at their gas bills to make sure they’re not on a bad deal with an unregulated supplier,” CUB Executive Director David Kolata said. “We’ve seen gas customers overpay by hundreds of dollars because of bad deals—and sometimes people don’t even know they’re with another gas supplier.”

From October 2016 through Feb. 8, 2017, CUB has handled 111 complaints and inquiries about alternative gas suppliers, compared with 67 in the same period last winter.

Northern Illinois customers have the option of choosing a company other than the regulated utility—Peoples Gas, North Shore Gas or Nicor Gas—to supply them with heating gas. In the current market, it’s likely that the regulated utilities offer the lowest prices. CUB warned consumers to beware of these pitfalls:

- **High-pressure sales tactics:** Beware of people at your door who say they’re from the “gas company.” Don’t give out your account number or gas bill to just anybody who asks for it. That person may be trying to illegally sign you up for an offer without your permission. Before signing up, call CUB if you have any questions about an offer. Remember, you don’t have to choose another company to supply you with gas.
- **Low introductory rates that shoot up after a short period:** Ask if the rate is an introductory or promotional rate, and, if so, when it ends and what the new rate will be.
- **Extra fees:** Ask if there is a monthly fee, and if so, factor that into the per-therm price.
- **Punishing exit fees:** Ask if there is an exit fee if you want to leave a plan before the contract is up. Under the law, exit fees are capped at \$50, and customers are allowed to leave a contract without paying a fee within 10 days after the date of the first bill.

CUB is Illinois’ leading nonprofit utility watchdog. Created by the Illinois Legislature, CUB opened its doors in 1984 to represent the interests of residential and small-business utility customers. Since then, it has saved consumers more than \$20 billion by helping to block rate hikes and secure refunds. For more information, call CUB’s Consumer Hotline, 1-800-669-5556, or visit its award-winning website, www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org.

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