

## **Telephone Customer Bill of Rights**

The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) is a state agency that has authority over many aspects of the service provided by your telephone company including rates and quality of service.

This “bill of rights” summarizes some of the PUCO’s rules for telephone companies. For more detailed information, please contact your telephone company or the PUCO.

## **Resolving Problems and Disputes**

### Informal Complaints

If you have a question about your telephone bill or service, contact the phone company first. You may call or send a letter to the company. The telephone number to your phone company is printed on your bill. It is also in your local telephone directory, along with an address to the company.

If your concern is not resolved after contacting a customer service representative, ask to speak with a supervisor. If your problem is still not resolved, contact the consumer hotline for help. The hotline staff will review rules with you, advise you of your rights, and if needed, will work with you and the company to try to solve your problem.

You may reach the PUCO at:

1-800-686-7826 (toll free) or 1-614-466-3292 or for TDD/TTY at 1-800-866-1570 (toll free) or 1-614-466-8180, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. weekdays.

Internet – [www.PUCO.ohio.gov](http://www.PUCO.ohio.gov)

Mail Address: Public Interest Center  
Public Utilities Commission of Ohio  
180 East Broad Street  
Columbus, Ohio 43215-3793

Residential customers may contact the Ohio Consumers’ Counsel at:

1-877-742-5622 (toll free) or 1-614-466-9467 from 8:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. weekdays.

Internet – [www.pickocc.org](http://www.pickocc.org)

Mail Address: Ohio Consumers’ Counsel  
10 West Broad Street, Suite 1800  
Columbus, Ohio 43215-3485

## Formal Complaints

If you are not able to reach an agreement with the company through the PUCO informal complaint process, you have the right to file a formal complaint. You can get a formal complaint form from the PUCO by telephone, by writing to the address listed above, or by accessing the PUCO's web page.

If you are a residential consumer, you may represent yourself in the formal complaint proceeding or hire an attorney to represent you. The OCC, as the legal representative for residential customers, may also assist you. Corporations must be represented by an attorney.

After you file a formal complaint form with the PUCO, the company is given an opportunity to respond to your complaint. Provided the PUCO determines that reasonable grounds exist for proceeding with your complaint, the PUCO will mail a notice setting a hearing date and time. The hearing will take place before a PUCO attorney examiner at the PUCO's offices in Columbus. The attorney examiner may set a prehearing conference with both you and the company for one last attempt to resolve the matter informally before a formal hearing begins. The formal hearing is similar to a court hearing with a court reporter recording the proceedings. The hearing examiner will consider the testimony and evidence presented. You have the responsibility to prove the merits of the complaint. The PUCO will then review all the evidence and make a decision on the case.

## Ordering Service

When you order local service, your phone company will explain the choices available to you. These choices will include different types of local service and any extra features you might want or need. The company will explain the cost of each option as well as how to use any special features.

If you receive federal or state benefits of any kind, be sure to tell your phone company. You may be eligible for low-income assistance, which may include a discount on your basic local service, a waiver of service connection fees, a waiver of your deposit, and/or a special payment plan.

When you order your local service, you will be asked to choose a long-distance carrier. However, you do not have to choose a specific long distance carrier. You may want to have a local-only service and to use other long distance options such as prepaid calling cards or a 10-10-xxx carrier. If you don't want anyone to be able to make long distance calls from your phone, you should ask for a long distance block. You may also wish to ask the company if it has any other long distance protection.

You may want to request other blocking options such as blocks to 900 services, collect calls, third-party calls, or pay-per-use features. Some or all of these options are free of charge.

Some charges on your bill, including charges for basic service and some optional services, are approved by the PUCO. These charges are called regulated charges. Basic services are necessary for your telephone to operate. Your phone will work without optional services, such as call waiting, three-way calling, and caller ID.

Other charges on your bill are unregulated and do not require PUCO approval of the rates. Charges in this category are for some services or products that you can get from the phone company or other sources. Examples of unregulated services or products would be voice mail, telephone sets, inside wire maintenance, or internet service.

When you order service and once each year, your phone company will provide you with a free directory(ies), unless the company chooses to provide directory assistance free of charge. The front of your directory will provide information such as: emergency numbers, the phone number of your local phone company, locations where you can pay your bill, an explanation of your local phone company, locations where you can pay your bill, an explanation of your local calling area or a phone number to call to get this information, and your responsibilities regarding inside wiring. You have a right to receive, upon request, a directory or directories listing all of the extended area service (EAS) numbers within your local calling areas.

### Service Connection Fees

Your local telephone company may charge you an installation or “service connection” fee when you first establish service and each time you transfer service to a new address. You have the right to spread the payment of these charges over three months.

### Deposits

Your local or long distance phone company may require you, as a new or existing customer, to pay a cash deposit if you do not pay your bill on time or if you do not have credit established with the company. Your telephone company has a policy to determine your credit status and when you will have to pay a deposit.

The company may look at your credit history when deciding whether or not to require a deposit. However, a deposit may not be based upon where you live, your race, your gender, or your marital status.

A deposit is not required if another person, acceptable to the telephone company, will guarantee payment of your local service.

If you are already a customer, you may be required to pay a deposit if you make two or more late payments in a one-year period. A deposit for local service will be based only on your local usage. You may also have to pay an additional deposit for long distance service.

After you have paid a deposit, the company must refund your original deposit amount plus simple interest if you pay all your telephone bills on time for the following twelve months. If you pay a deposit, you still have to pay your telephone bill on time. Your deposit cannot be used to pay a current bill. Your deposit will be applied to an outstanding account balance only after you stop service at your current address.

### Pay-Per-Use Features

Your local phone company may offer a variety of pay-per-use features, such as automatic callback, three-way calling, name and number delivery, and repeat dialing. Often these are automatically available to you. All you have to do is activate the feature and pay for its use on an as-used basis. Before you use a feature, check with your local phone company to see how much the feature costs for each use. If you wish to block access to pay-per-use telephone features on your line, call your local phone company. Blocking for these features should be free.

## Blocking

You have the right to prevent your phone number from appearing on a caller ID device. Two options are available to you. You may block individual phone calls by using per call blocking. You simply dial \*67 from your touchtone phone (rotary – dial 1167) before dialing the number you wish to call. Per call blocking is free.

For a monthly fee, you can use per line blocking which blocks all calls automatically. The charge for this service will not be more than the charge for non-published number service. Per-line blocking is free to customers with a non-published number. If you wish to have per-line blocking, you should contact your local phone company and request it. If you use this service, you can unblock individual calls by dialing \*82 (rotary – dial 1182).

Due to technical limitations, either service (per-call or per-line blocking) may not be able to block the appearance of your phone number on caller ID devices when you call an “800” number.

## Providing Your Service

Your local phone company must provide adequate service at rates approved by the PUCO. The company must provide you with its rates upon your request.

When you order new service, the company has to install the service within five business days or on a later day if you request. If the company does not provide service within this time frame, you may receive a full or partial waiver of installation charges.

The company will bill you monthly for service. Each bill must show: (1) all charges for regulated and any unregulated services that may appear on your bill; (2) an itemized listing of and charges for long distance calls; (3) an itemized listing for all charges for “900” and other pay-per-call services; (4) the total amount due; and, (5) the date when your payment must be received by the company before the bill is considered past due.

If you disagree with the charges shown on your bill, you should contact your telephone company. If you have a billing dispute, the company will not disconnect your service if you pay the undisputed portion of the bill. While the complaint is being investigated, you must pay all current undisputed bills and continue discussion with the company to settle the complaint.

If your telephone service is not working, call your company’s repair office immediately. If the telephone company takes more than twenty-four hours to fix your phone service, you may receive a credit on your bill for that day. If you are without telephone service for more than forty-eight hours, additional service credits may be applied to your account by your local telephone company. If you do not see a credit on your next bill, you should contact the company to see when your bill will be adjusted.

## Repairing Out-of-Service Conditions Where Medical or Life-Threatening Conditions Exist

Your local service provider must always act quickly and responsibly in responding to reports of out-of-service conditions. Your local service provider is required to have procedures that prioritize the restoration of service to customers with special needs, including police and fire stations, hospitals, key medical personnel, and subscribers with medical or life-threatening conditions. If a medical or life-threatening situation exists in your household, you should let your local service provider know of your circumstances. You should find out from the company

what you need to do to be placed on their priority restoral list. Even if you are placed on the company's priority restoral list, the restoration of your service may take longer than you expect. Therefore, you should consider alternative means of communication during any period you are without service.

### Customer Appointments

Your local company must provide you with a four-hour window for scheduling an installation or repair appointment. If you do not need to be present at the premises when the company repairs service, the company will give you a commitment time for having the repairs done.

If the company does not show up for your scheduled installation appointment, you may be eligible for an automatic waiver of at least on-half of the installation charges. If the company fails to meet your repair appointment or commitment you may be eligible for an automatic credit on your bill in the amount of one-half months charges for any related local services not working as a result of that failure.

## **Paying for Your Service**

### Paying Your Bill

You must pay for regulated charges and any required deposit by the due date on your bill. The due date has to be at least fourteen days after the postmark on your bill. If you pay only part of your bill, the telephone company will apply your payment toward your local service charges first. In order to get a final bill, you must tell the company when you are moving and need to have service shut off or transferred to another address.

### Undercharges and Refunds

If you have been undercharged, the company will bill you for the difference between what you were actually billed and what you should have been billed. You will be given at least the same number of months to pay as the time period over which the billing error occurred.

### Service Disconnection

The phone company will send you a bill every month and allow you fourteen days to pay it. If you do not pay it on time, the company may disconnect your service. Before disconnecting your phone, the phone company must send you a disconnection notice at least seven days before the shut-off date.

The disconnection notice will tell you the amount past due of your local service and the date when you must pay that amount to avoid disconnection of your local service. Your local service can be disconnected only for nonpayment of regulated local service charges.

The disconnect notice may also include any amount past due for long distance which must be paid to avoid disconnection of your long distance service. Your long distance service can be disconnected only for failure to pay your regulated long distance charges.

The company does not have to notify you before disconnecting service for safety reasons or if tampering with the company's equipment is discovered.

If your residential service is disconnected for nonpayment, you may have access to emergency services (9-1-1 or "0" for the operator, where 9-1-1 is not available) for at least fourteen days.

### Stop Disconnection

You can keep your local and long distance services on if you pay the exact amount shown on the disconnection notice on or before the disconnection date on the notice.

You may keep at least your local service on by paying the exact amount past due for local charges (as shown on the disconnection notice) on or before the disconnection date on the notice.

You may also avoid disconnection by setting up a payment plan with the phone company to pay your past due balance.

If your questions regarding a disconnection notice are not resolved after calling the telephone company:

- ? residential and business customers can call the PUCO
- ? residential customers can call the OCC
- ? residential and business customers can file a formal complaint with the PUCO with a request to delay disconnection of your service until after the formal complaint hearing.

Your service cannot be disconnected between 12:30 p.m. on the last business day of the week and 8:00 a.m. the following Monday. Should your service be disconnected, contact the company to find out what you need to do to have it restored. The company will have someone available to reconnect service until at least the close of business, Monday through Friday.

### Harassing calls

The following are some recommendations on how to deal with obscene or harassing calls:

- ? say hello only once;
- ? do not talk or listen;
- ? hang up gently so as not to let the caller know you are angry or upset; and
- ? write down the date and time of the call.

If the calls continue, contact your phone company. If you receive a threatening call, report it to the police immediately.

The company may be able to offer you additional tips on how to deal with the harassing calls. The company may place a trace on your line to determine who is placing the calls. The caller may then be warned of potential legal action and possible disconnection of phone service if the calls continue.

Some companies now offer a service that permits you to dial a code to automatically trace the number of a caller. You must follow up with the phone company if you use this service. Contact your local company to see if it offers other call management tools that can help you deter unwanted calls of any type.

If you do not want to get calls from telemarketers, you can ask to be placed on a “do-not-call” list by writing to:

Telephone Preference Service  
Direct Marketing Association  
P.O. Box 9014  
Farmingdale, NY 11735-9014

You may register with them by sending your name(s), home address, and home telephone number (including area code) and signature in a letter or on a postcard.

If you do not want to get telemarketing calls from your telephone company, contact the company and ask to be placed on a “do-not-call” list.

### Maintenance of Equipment and Service

Local phone companies are responsible for providing and maintaining service leading up to your home or business. You are responsible for maintaining and repairing the wire and equipment inside your home or business. You may contract with the company to maintain or repair your inside wiring and/or equipment, but you are not under any obligation to do so.

When repairs are needed, you can pay the company to service the equipment, hire someone else to do the work, or do the work yourself. If you rent, you should check with your landlord prior to scheduling any repairs.

If you choose an inside wire maintenance plan with the phone company, your company must give you a ten-day “cooling off” period to allow you to change your mind about whether to keep the maintenance contract for inside wiring. You will not be charged for the plan if you cancel during this ten-day period.

### Buying or Leasing Your Telephone

You may buy or lease your telephone. Leasing may offer certain benefits such as free replacement or repairs, but you may find that buying your phone is the cheapest alternative for you.

### Operator Services

When you place calls from public pay phones as well as from hotels, hospitals, and airports, you may reach an alternative operator service (AOS) provider. AOS services include handling of collect calls, third number billing, and even calls billed to telephone company calling cards. AOS providers pay businesses a fee or commission for each operator-assisted call placed. As a result, the cost for a call placed through an AOS is often higher than the cost for a call placed through a local telephone company or your long distance company.

Prior to making your call, you have the right to find out which operator service will be placing the call and all charges for that call. If you are not satisfied, hang up and you will not be charged for the call.

If you want to use your own long distance company, call the company directly to find out how to use its service away from home.

## Slamming

You have the right to choose your local and long distance providers. No one has the right to change your company without your permission. If this happens, it is called slamming. If you are slammed, you must contact your chosen company to re-establish service with that company. You must also contact the company, which slammed you to cancel service with them and to arrange any credits or refunds. If you are not satisfied after these calls, contact the PUCO.