



Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

Your Residential Utility Consumer Advocate

CONSUMERS' FACT SHEET

Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

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TELEPHONE BILL MADE EASY

You receive and pay your telephone bill every month, but do you know what the charges on your bill mean? This fact sheet from the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel, your residential utility consumer advocate, explains your landline phone bill and the charges you may see on your bill.

Landline phone service, or wireline service, is traditional, wired phone service. Landline phone service should not be confused with other phone service options that are available to consumers. These options include wireless phone service (cell phones and smartphones), Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), which is phone service over an internet connection, and prepaid phone services from providers. There are also bundled packages, which can combine phone service with other services like internet and TV. This fact sheet only explains billing terms for traditional landline phone service.

Reading your bill

Your bill should include the name of your telephone service provider. If you receive services from more than one provider, each provider should list and subtotal its charges separately. Your phone bill must notify you of changes to your provider.

Your provider can charge you for a variety of services and offerings. The charges on your bill can typically be sorted into four categories: standard fees, providers' fees, consumer opt-in charges, and taxes. Each category will be discussed in detail below.

1. **Standard fees.** It is common to see all of these charges listed on your landline phone bill. All landline consumers can expect to pay these fees. State or federal law may require these fees.

Monthly service fee – This is your fee for basic landline service. The amount charged for this fee should be the same on each bill unless your contract changes. Other fees, such as the ones listed below, may be included in your monthly service fee.

Subscriber Line Charge (SLC) – The SLC is also known as an access fee. The SLC is a fee that allows your provider to maintain the local phone network, such as phone lines. Providers assess this fee for every phone line, meaning households with more than one phone line can be charged more. The Federal Communications Commission has ruled that this fee may not exceed \$6.50 per line.

Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) fee – This fee helps cover the cost of providing cost-free transmission and translation phone services to consumers with hearing or speech disabilities.

Universal Service fee – This fee contributes to the Universal Service Fund. USF provides phone service to rural areas and areas where the cost of phone service is expensive.

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USF programs help ensure Ohioans have access to affordable telecommunications services, like internet and basic phone services.

911 emergency service fee – Providers add this fee to your monthly service fee to pay for local emergency services, such as police, fire, and rescue systems.

2. **Providers' fees.** These fees may be charged by your provider and vary between providers. These fees are charged in addition to your standard service fees.

Administrative fee – Providers assess a fee to cover the costs of providing service. For details on what this fee covers for your phone service, contact your provider.

Directory assistance fee – Providers may assess this fee if you use 411 or directory assistance services.

Late fee – Providers may assess an additional fee if you do not pay your bill on time.

Local number portability fee – This fee pays for phone number portability, or “porting.” Portability means you can keep the same phone number when you switch providers.

Minimum monthly fee – Some providers assess this fee for long-distance calls. The minimum fee is the same month to month, even if you don't make long-distance calls.

Operator-assisted calls fee – Providers may assess this fee if you use operator services.

3. **Consumer opt-in charges.** These fees are charged to consumers that choose to use these services.

Expanded area service fee – Expanded area service expands your local calling area into a service area which would otherwise be long-distance. This flat fee is assessed for calls made in the expanded local area. Providers assess this fee instead of charging you long distance fees or charging consumers on a per-minute basis. The size of the local calling area varies between providers.

Feature charges – Your provider can impose additional charges for optional features, including caller ID, three-way calling, and call waiting. Opt-out of these services if you do not want to pay for them.

Inside-wiring maintenance plans – You will pay an additional charge if you enroll in your provider's inside-wiring maintenance plan. These plans insure you against wiring problems, such as broken wires or loose jacks.

4. **Taxes.** All local phone bills are subject to a 3 percent federal tax, in addition to state and local sales taxes. Your bill should clearly identify these taxes.

For questions regarding charges, including charges not defined on this fact sheet, contact your provider. Your bill should list a toll-free number you can call if you have questions or concerns regarding your billing charges.

If you understand the charges on your bill, you can be better prepared to recognize scams. Some consumers have reported that scammers had switched their provider without their permission in a scam known as “slamming.” Unauthorized charges are sometimes added on to long, confusing bills in a scam known as “cramming.” If you don't recognize the companies or charges on your bill, you may be paying for services

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The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts.

The state agency also educates consumers about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues.

For more information, please visit the OCC website at www.occ.ohio.gov.



The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel is an equal opportunity employer and provider of services.

you didn't authorize. The OCC offers more information about billing scams on our fact sheet, "How to Avoid Cramming and Slamming."

Paying your bill

Pay your bill as soon as possible to avoid paying late fees or missing a payment. Providers accept payment in a variety of ways. Some payment methods come with an additional charge, known as a "cost of convenience." Ask if your method of payment charges an additional fee. You should also be aware that not all payment methods will post your payment in a timely manner. Before you pay, know if your method will post your payment before the bill due date. The OCC offers more information regarding bill payment options on our fact sheet, "The Cost of Convenience: Paying Your Utility Bills."

Your phone bill must identify the charges you must pay to keep basic service. If you receive a disconnection notice or if your provider disconnects your service for nonpayment, you should contact your provider to see if they offer payment plans or assistance programs. Providers may also offer Lifeline programs, which provide financial assistance for phone service. Apply for payment assistance or learn more from your provider.

Filing a complaint

Contact your provider if you have a question or want to dispute a charge. OCC is currently assisting consumers with complaints about basic wireline phone service. Please contact OCC at occ@occ.ohio.gov or 1-877-742-5622. You can also file an informal complaint with the PUCO's online complaint form.

Find the PUCO's complaint form on its website, www.puco.ohio.gov. You can also contact the PUCO with questions or complaints toll-free at 1-800-686-7826, or write to them:

**ATTN: IAD
Public Utilities
Commission of Ohio**
180 E. Broad St., 14th Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43215

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) also accepts complaints regarding telecommunications issues at 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) or at www.consumercomplaints.fcc.gov. Forms are available to print on its website. Fax your complaint forms to 1-866-418-0232 or mail them to:

**Consumer and
Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and
Complaints Division**
445 12th St. SW
Washington, DC 20554

You can also alert the FCC of an issue without filing a complaint by using the "Tell Us Your Story" feature on the FCC's website, www.consumercomplaints.fcc.gov.

Review your bill carefully every month. If you have questions regarding your bill, contact your provider. To help you learn more about your phone service, the OCC has more information on its website, www.occ.ohio.gov. The OCC has fact sheets about telephone service options available to Ohio phone consumers. The OCC also has fact sheets about receiving payment assistance and avoiding unwanted calls.

