



## Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

Your Residential Utility Consumer Advocate

# CONSUMERS' FACT SHEET

### Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

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# Your guide to choosing among many TELEPHONE OPTIONS

Consumers have relied on telephone communications for more than a century. For much of this time, landline phone service was consumers' primary method of telecommunication. But new technologies have made more phone options available to consumers. The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), your residential utility consumer advocate, has developed this fact sheet to explain your options for phone service.

## How do I choose a phone provider?

Review your bill, and answer these questions with members of your household that use the phone.

- ▶ How often do I make local calls? How often do I make long-distance calls? International calls?
- ▶ Do I use a local phone provider or a wireless provider for local calls? Do I use a long-distance provider or a wireless provider for long-distance calling?
- ▶ How much do I currently pay per month for all phone services (e.g., local, long-distance, wireless)?
- ▶ Do I receive separate bills for each service (e.g., local, long-distance, wireless) or are they on a single bill?
- ▶ What features currently appear on my monthly bill? Which of these features do I actually use?

- ▶ Are there any features that I could use for privacy and/or convenience but have not ordered from my current phone provider? (e.g., Caller ID, Call Blocking)
- ▶ Do I use my phone line for safety needs or for internet access?
- ▶ Will changing my provider affect my high-speed internet (broadband) service?

## Service options

When deciding whether to switch to another provider, research all available service options and compare prices between providers. You may also consider other factors such as convenience and customer service when choosing a new provider.

You can sign up for basic phone service from your traditional (also called "incumbent") provider and add special features as desired. Most providers offer packages that include special features such as Caller ID, Call Waiting, and voicemail. Many cable companies also offer local phone service, often bundled with internet and cable television services.

If you decide to switch your current local service, do not cancel your current service until after it has been switched, as some providers require that you already have a local provider. If you decide to switch local providers and your new plan does not include long-distance service,

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contact your current long-distance provider to make sure your current long-distance service will transfer with the local provider switch.

The following are some of the alternatives offered to phone consumers, in addition to basic local phone service:

### **Prepaid service**

Prepaid local service requires consumers to pay for services in advance. Most prepaid service in Ohio is offered by wireless providers. Prepaid providers often advertise to consumers who have no credit, bad credit, or have been disconnected by a local phone provider for nonpayment. Prepaid landline service is typically more expensive than basic, local service from a local phone provider. Connection fees, service, and extra features like Caller ID are usually more expensive in prepaid landline service.

### **Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)**

Consumers with high-speed internet (broadband) could receive their phone services through Voice over Internet Protocol, or VoIP (often referred to as digital phone). With VoIP, phone calls are placed over an internet connection. Special equipment, like a phone adapter, will be needed to make and receive calls using VoIP technology, but it will be provided by your VoIP provider. You may be charged a setup fee for the equipment.

Consumers who have internet service through their phone provider or cable operator already have the option of using VoIP service from those providers. You should be able to keep your phone number if you switch to VoIP.

VoIP offers similar sound quality as landline service. However, VoIP will not work during a power outage. Problems with your computer, internet connection, or VoIP equipment may also affect your ability to make and receive calls. Your security system or medical alert system may still require a landline in order to be operational.

### **Be sure to get answers to these questions when switching local or long-distance phone providers:**

- ▶ Is there a sign-up fee?
- ▶ Are there any promotional offers?
- ▶ What is the contract period?
- ▶ Is there a switching fee or early termination fee if you decide to change providers?
- ▶ How will I be billed?
- ▶ What will be my total monthly bill (including all fees, taxes, and surcharges)?
- ▶ How does the provider handle billing discrepancies?
- ▶ Are customer service representatives available 24 hours a day or does the provider use an automated service?
- ▶ How many consumers does the provider serve and how large is its service territory?
- ▶ If I need payment assistance, does the provider have programs in place, such as Lifeline?
- ▶ Is there a program for consumers with medical needs, such as a priority repair schedules for consumers with serious medical conditions?
- ▶ If I eliminate my phone service, will it affect other services I need (i.e., security systems, medical monitors, or internet access)?

Ask VoIP providers about their policies on service quality and customer service issues such as billing. Be aware that VoIP is not subject to the same rules and regulations as local or long-distance phone providers.

### **Wireless phone service**

Wireless phone service allows residential consumers to stay connected just about whenever and wherever they want.

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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](http://www.occ.ohio.gov).



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Wireless service providers usually offer a variety of calling, texting, and data plans.

There are advantages and disadvantages to wireless service instead of landline service. An advantage to wireless service is mobility. You can take your phone with you wherever you go. A disadvantage for wireless is that you may lose service during power outages. Unlike traditional landline service, wireless service is not required to have back-up power, so it may be unavailable during power outages. Another disadvantage is wireless sound quality, which may be worse than landline service. Additionally, home security systems and medical monitors often require a landline to communicate with the monitoring office.

Not all areas in Ohio have wireless coverage. You may check wireless providers' coverage maps for the areas in which you want to use the service before deciding to sign up for a wireless plan.

**But do not take the coverage maps at face value. Most wireless providers' coverage maps include disclaimers about the accuracy of their maps.** In some locations, you may experience dropped calls and poor connections when using a wireless service, even in your own home. If you have a friend or family member who subscribes to a provider you are considering, ask them about coverage and signal quality. You may want to borrow their phone to test the provider's signal strength at your home and other locations you need to make calls from.

Before enrolling in a wireless contract understand your usage habits, like how many minutes you spend making calls, the number of texts you usually send, and the amount of internet data you use monthly. Wireless plans vary in their limits on minutes, texts and data available before you pay overage charges. In addition, wireless contracts typically last one or two years. If you decide to terminate the contract early, you could be required to pay a cancellation fee.

Many wireless providers also offer features similar to those available from local phone providers. Be sure to ask if these features carry any additional charges. Also, if you decide to switch from one wireless provider to another, you usually have the option to keep your phone number.

### **Bundled services**

Many local phone plans bundle services and features together for a price discount. Ask about how bundling services and features may affect your current service before making the switch. Bundled service providers may not offer consumer protections, like complaint procedures and disconnection notices. In addition, some bundles may require you to subscribe to your phone provider's VoIP service, which may not be subject to the same standards as regulated phone providers. Systems that rely on your landline, like security systems or internet access, may also be affected if you must change to VoIP to get a service bundle.

