

TELEPHONE CONSUMER ALERT

Vermont Department of Public Service Division of Consumer Affairs & Public Information

December, 1999

NEW CONSUMER PROTECTION RULES APPLY TO ALL TELEPHONE COMPANIES DOING BUSINESS IN VERMONT

On July 2, 1999, the Vermont Public Service Board issued an order, which for the first time establishes for all telephone customers a consumer bill of rights, and specific consumer protection and privacy provisions for enforcing the bill of rights. All telecommunications carriers authorized to provide services in Vermont are required to comply with the order.



YOUR RIGHTS ARE:

- You have the right to know from whom you are buying.
- You have the right to know the full price of the goods and services that you are purchasing.
- You have the right to reasonable payment terms.
- You have the right to fair treatment by all providers.
- You have the right to impartial resolution of disputes.
- You have the right to reasonable compensation for poor service quality.
- You have the right of access to basic local exchange service as long as basic local exchange service charges are paid.
- You have the right to be free of improper discrimination in prices, terms, conditions, or offers.
- You have the right to privacy by controlling the release of information about yourself and your calling patterns and by controlling unreasonable intrusions upon your privacy.
- You have the right to join with other consumers for mutual benefit.

- You have the right to know and control what you are buying.

The Bill of Rights lists basic consumer protection principles to guide telephone companies and consumers as to acceptable practices in Vermont's competitive telecommunications environment. The consumer protection and privacy standards below create specific, enforceable standards based on these principles.

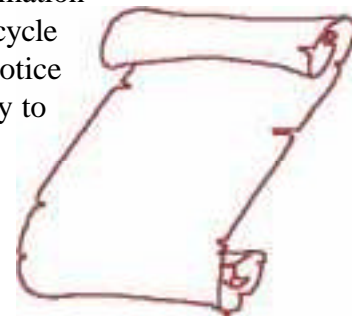
PUTTING THESE RIGHTS INTO PRACTICE

Notice at Time of Service Order

When you order a new service, your company has to give you a clear and understandable description of the terms, conditions, rates, and charges for all the services that you request. It also has to tell you what the least cost alternatives are.

Written Confirmation of Service Order

When you order new service, your company has to give you written confirmation within the first billing cycle after your order. The notice must tell you, in an easy to understand manner, significant terms and conditions that affect the rates that you will be charged. If you



request written confirmation earlier, your company has to give it to you within five days of your request. You can cancel any service within fifteen days of receipt of the written confirmation.

Notice of Services

Every year, your company has to tell you in writing that service and rate information is available in phone directories or, if you ask for it, in other ways, such as brochures.

Notice of Changes in Rates, Terms, and Conditions of Service

Your company has to tell you of any change in rates or other terms and conditions of service. If the change increases the cost of your service, the company has to tell you at least thirty days in advance. If your company chooses to inform you with bill inserts, you cannot be given less than fifteen days advance notice.

Fair Marketing Practices

Telephone companies are not allowed to act in an unfair or deceptive way. A company cannot make any offer for services to you without stating clearly and conspicuously whether there are any material exclusions or conditions that would apply to you. The company has to either describe those exclusions directly to you or provide you with a toll-free number for you to call to learn of the restrictions. You may never be enrolled in a service unless you say that you want that service.

Content of Bills

When you get your bill, it has to be reasonably detailed. This means that, at a minimum, it has to itemize services, usage, and charges at a unit level (how many units you used and the rate per unit). Non-recurring, recurring, and usage charges have to be separately listed. Your company has to put its name and a primary telephone number for contact on the bill. It also has to give you the name and a toll-free number (an address, if there is

no toll-free number) for each company for whom it is providing billing and collection services.

Customer Service

Your company has to give you courteous, competent, and timely service. It also has to treat you fairly at all times. Your company cannot retaliate against you in any way if you complain to the company, the Department or the Board.

Correction of Directory Assistance and Telephone Directory Errors and Omissions

Companies have to make sure to promptly correct directory assistance and phone directory errors and omissions. If possible, companies shall make the correct number available through directory assistance within two business days.

Non-Discrimination Principles

Even if your company has the freedom to choose how to conduct business in certain circumstances, they still have to treat similarly situated customers in the same manner at all times. It has to process all similar requests for a product or service on a non-discriminatory basis.

Discounts for Persons who are Deaf, Speech Impaired, or Hard of Hearing

If you are deaf, speech impaired or hearing impaired and you use a TTY, your telephone company has to give you a forty percent discount on intrastate services.

Discounts for Persons who are Blind, or Visually Impaired

If you are blind or visually impaired, your telephone company has to offer you directory assistance without charge.

PRIVACY PROTECTIONS

Your telephone company has to give you notice, at least once a year, describing the information that is released to the recipients of your 800, 888, or 976 calls.

Your telephone company has to let you control the level of privacy of your telephone number. It also has to maintain the privacy of non-published listings, to the extent possible, when dealing with other telephone companies.

Your local telephone company has to allow you free per-call blocking and provide free per-line blocking to you if you have a heightened safety interest or at your request if you have a non-published number.

Your local telephone company has to tell you in the telephone directory how to help stop unwanted telemarketing at your home. Telephone companies that conduct telemarketing in Vermont have to, within the first thirty seconds of the telemarketing call, ask you whether you wish to hear the solicitation.

At least thirty days before a telephone company does something that may affect your privacy interests, the company has to file a statement of foreseeable privacy impacts that describes any options that the company proposes to make available to address your privacy concerns.

DISPUTE RESOLUTION

Your phone company has to list on the bill the telephone number(s) at which you may reach representatives of the company for information or the resolution of any dispute that may arise.

Your phone company has to give you customer service representatives with whom your complaints and inquiries can be registered.

Your phone company has to give you a response to a your inquiry within seven business days of the receipt of your inquiry or complaint.

Your phone company has to notify you, if you are not satisfied with the resolution offered, that you may seek further review of the dispute by higher management within the company, if available, or you may contact the Department of Public Service.

You can call the Department of Public Service Consumer Hotline at 1-800-622-4496 or 802-828-2332, the TTY line at 1-800-734-8390, by e-mail at vtdps@psd.state.vt.us or write to: Division of Consumer Affairs & Public Information, Vermont Department of Public Service, 112 State Street-Drawer 20, Montpelier, VT 05620-2601.

FOR MORE INFORMATION...

Additional consumer information is available on the VT DPS Web site:
<http://www.state.vt.us/psd/>

About the Vermont Department of Public Service

The Vermont Department of Public Service serves the citizens of Vermont through public advocacy, planning and other actions that meet the public's need for energy, telecommunications, and other regulated utility systems that are least-cost, environmentally sound, efficient, reliable, sustainable, and safe.

The Consumer Affairs and Public Information Division protects Vermont consumers by resolving consumer complaints against regulated utilities, advocating for policies which protect consumer interests and educating consumers about utility issues so they can more effectively advocate for themselves.