



## **A message from Jerome G. Solove**

### ***Governing Board Chairman***

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In a year when the economic downturn left many Ohioans with financial challenges, the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) reinforced its commitment to protecting consumers in Ohio's 4.5 million households. In 2009, the OCC advocated for consumers by seeking reasonable rates and adequate service quality in cases at state and federal regulatory agencies, in appeals at court and in draft legislation at the legislature. The OCC also continued its commitment to educate and inform consumers on a wide array of topics including billing issues, energy conservation and financial assistance.

Clearly, residential utility consumers need the OCC to be their voice. Consumers' Counsel Janine Migden-Ostrander and her professional, highly skilled staff faced many complicated cases in the electric, natural gas, telecommunications and water industries.

In 2008, the OCC and its consumer advocate partners were at the forefront of developing the state's electric policy law. In 2009, it continued that effort by contributing much-needed information as rules were developed to implement sections of the legislation. Because of the efforts of the OCC and its partners, improvements have been made to the state's energy portfolio. Much work remains as Ohio transitions to greater energy efficiency and use of solar, wind and other sources of renewable energy.

In the latter half of the year, the agency worked to improve telephone deregulation legislation pushed by the telephone industry. The OCC advocated for the continuation of consumer protections, arguing that price deregulation should not erode people's rights to those basic protections. The OCC Governing Board unanimously passed a resolution in support of the OCC and other interested parties seeking protection of service standards for Ohio's telephone customers.

In addition to its legislative efforts, the agency negotiated to establish a number of customer-focused programs in rate cases, making available millions of dollars in low-income assistance from Duke Energy Ohio, FirstEnergy, Columbia Gas of Ohio and Aqua Ohio that will help hundreds of thousands financially-strapped Ohioans. Through the efforts of the OCC and others, Vectren Energy Delivery of Ohio agreed to continue its low-income weatherization program.

The OCC also took its protection of consumer interests to the Supreme Court of Ohio. The agency appealed a rate mechanism that created large fixed-charge payments for all residential natural gas customers. This rate structure resulted in low-use, low-income customers experiencing an increase in the distribution portion of their bills while higher volume users saw their bills decrease. The effect reduces opportunities to conserve energy. The agency also challenged a decision by the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio to allow retroactive collection of rate increases by American Electric Power and challenged the size of the increase that has raised rates significantly.

