



COMMUNICATING WITH CONSUMERS

Introduction and overview

Communicating with Ohio's 4.5 million residential utility consumer households is one of the greatest challenges for the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC). Keeping consumers up-to-date about utility issues and resources available to them is important, especially during challenging economic times.

Research shows that one in 11 Ohio households had either its electric or natural gas service disconnected for non-payment during 2009. As consumers continue to struggle to make ends meet, the OCC utilizes a variety of electronic and printed material and other outreach methods to remain in contact.

The OCC also works with consumers in hands-on workshops, educates community leaders about key utility issues and talks with the news media about protecting utility consumers. The OCC also reaches out to the Hispanic community.

The OCC staff leads a number of initiatives to help Ohio's low-income consumers. To ensure Ohioans are aware of these efforts, the OCC participated in Gov. Ted Strickland's Anti-Poverty Task Force and the state's Low-Income Dialogue Group, which the OCC helped create in 2004.

Outreach and Education

For residential consumers, making good utility decisions was even more important in 2009 because of job losses, reduced incomes and increased utility rates. Faced with lower budgets, consumers turned to the OCC to learn ways to control costs. There was greater demand for presentations about utility assistance programs, energy efficiency and learning to manage utility bills. In 2009, more and more Ohioans faced a disconnection of their utility services because they could not pay their bills. As a result, interest in utility assistance programs increased.

The OCC's Outreach and Education (O&E) staff provided a valuable service to consumers in Ohio. They met with and educated consumer groups, social service agencies and individual consumers in their travels throughout the state. The staff conducted training sessions about utility assistance programs and Leader Voice Mail, provided speeches about energy efficiency, answered questions one-on-one at local fairs and shows, and visited community groups and agencies to provide information about the OCC's services. Altogether, O&E staff met with more than 41,500 Ohio consumers at more than 1,300 outreach events in 2009.

Left: Ray Foeller of the OCC speaks with consumers at an Outreach and Education event.

Consumers also continue to be interested in lowering their energy bills and making their homes more energy efficient and comfortable. The OCC's weatherization workshops and energy efficiency presentations attracted 5,200 consumers participating in nearly 200 sessions. Consumers learned low-cost methods to reduce their energy bills, including how to install a door sweep, insulate windows with heavy plastic, replace incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescent lights and weather-strip around doors. Many of the natural gas and electric utilities offered energy efficiency programs that assisted consumers with improving their home's efficiency at a reduced cost. The OCC negotiated for a number of these programs as part of utility rate cases.

Many utility cases threatened to impact consumer protections and consumer services. Telephone companies in metropolitan areas decided to mail telephone white pages only to consumers who request them. Consumers experienced increased costs for electric, natural gas and water. Legislation to deregulate local phone services could remove many of the current consumer protections offered by the Minimum Telephone Service Standards (MTSS). The OCC fought these changes and urged consumers to write letters and attend public hearings to voice their concerns. More than 55 groups partnered with the OCC to oppose the legislation. The O&E staff reached out to many community and consumer groups to educate them about the proposed changes and offer support for meeting these new challenges.



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OCC Communications and Outreach at a glance for 2009

- ▶ Met with Ohio consumers in 228 cities and 81 counties.
- ▶ Visited 499 organizations and agencies to educate about the OCC's services.
- ▶ More than 13,800 consumers attended the 586 presentations provided by the OCC.
- ▶ Staffed 121 shows, fairs, breakfast breaks and listener lunches to meet and educate more than 25,000 consumers.
- ▶ Met with more than 41,000 consumers through all outreach efforts.
- ▶ More than 3,499 new subscribers added the Consumers' Corner newsletter to their reading list.
- ▶ Mailed the newsletter six times annually to more than 98,000 consumers and consumer groups, and e-mailed to another 6,441.
- ▶ Distributed more than 145,000 pieces of educational materials to consumers and consumer groups, including brochures and fact sheets about utility topics, utility assistance, energy efficiency and renewable energy.
- ▶ Issued 84 news releases and responded to more than 355 news media inquiries.
- ▶ More than 85,900 visitors to the OCC Web site: www.pickocc.org

Community advisory panelists learned about the status of current utility issues

Regional Community Advisory Panels (CAP) meet in the spring and fall of each year to provide a close link between the OCC, communities and community groups in Ohio. Meetings in 2009 were held in Columbus, Findlay, Cincinnati, Waynesville and Norton.

CAP members represent community action agencies, jobs and family services departments, local governments, area agencies on aging, social service



Members of the OCC's Southwest Community Advisory Panel review materials.



Outreach and Education Program Specialist Andy Tinkham (right) meets with a utility consumer.

agencies, veterans services, agencies representing people with disabilities, homelessness and housing, legal aid and food banks.

The members expressed concerns about the increased need for social services due to the depressed economy. The OCC provided information about new resources for utility assistance made available by settlements in utility rate cases. The members also were interested in the on-line stores offered by many utilities providing discounted lighting, showerheads and programmable thermostats.

Low-income advocates attended Stay Connected train-the-trainer programs

Social service agencies turn to the OCC for assistance understanding the regulations of utility assistance programs for their clients. The OCC provided a record number of presentations to more than 2,200 consumers and consumer advocates attending 127 training sessions to learn about the programs. This hands-on training provided information about the Percentage of Income

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Payment Plan (PIPP), Home Energy Assistance Plan (HEAP) and Lifeline. Participants received a comprehensive workbook with detailed information about all of the utility assistance programs and the credit and disconnect rules.

Consumers educated at fairs during National Consumer Protection Week

Reaching out to senior centers, libraries, high schools and colleges, 13 smart consumer resource fairs were scheduled for National Consumer Protection Week in March 2009. The theme, “Nuts & Bolts: Tools for Today’s Economy,” focused on consumer protections, including utility complaints, reading the fine print, door-to-door marketing and avoiding consumer scams. The OCC joined federal and state agencies, including the Ohio Attorney General, the Social Security Administration and the Credit Union League, to coordinate education efforts across the state. The OCC met with more than 1,000 consumers at colleges, senior centers and libraries during the week.



OCC Attorney Chris Allwein (right) meets with consumers at the Ohio State Fair.



OCC's Ben Machado (left) talks with a consumer at Ohio's annual Solidarity Conference.

Hispanic outreach

The OCC worked with many agencies and coalition groups to educate and resolve utility issues for the Hispanic community. Hispanic events, such as festivals and fairs in Columbus and Cincinnati, provided an opportunity for the OCC to reach out to large numbers of Hispanics. Regular attendance at boards and coalitions allowed the OCC to stay in close contact with the Hispanic community.

Efforts are being made to increase the distribution of “El Informador,” the Spanish version of the OCC’s “Consumers’ Corner” newsletter. Its circulation now stands at 3,000. Providing a link with Ohio’s Spanish-speaking community is also a priority for the OCC’s Consumer Services Division, which employs bilingual consumer services representatives.

Media relations

The OCC’s communication outreach included issuing 84 press releases related to key information about residential utility issues. The communications staff also responded to more than 355 news media inquiries, prepared guest columns, letters to the editors of newspapers and online content. The staff

updated and created new fact sheets, brochures and other printed material.



OCC spokesman Anthony Rodriguez speaks with a reporter.

OCC Web site and online presence

The OCC continues to offer a popular resource to Ohioans with its informational and educational Web site. In 2009, more than 85,900 unique visitors used the Web site to learn about a variety of residential utility issues. In 2009, new sections to the Web site included information about telephone deregulation legislation (Senate Bill 162/House Bill 276), Leader Voice Mail, consumer choice about natural gas, and updated and translated resources for Spanish materials about utility issues.

Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force

The Ohio Anti-Poverty Task Force concluded its work in 2009 after it was created by Gov. Ted Strickland’s executive order on May 28, 2008. The task force, which included representation by Ohio Consumers’ Counsel Janine Migden-Ostrander, was made up of leaders from government, private non-profit agencies and the private sector. Its mission was to develop short-term and long-term solutions to the growing

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problem of poverty in Ohio. It has been estimated that about 13 percent of Ohioans reported incomes below the federal poverty guidelines and 22 percent are at 175 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.

The task force submitted short-term recommendations in September 2008. That was followed by a set of long-term goals, titled “Strategic Recommendations for Expanding Opportunity and Reducing Poverty in Ohio,” delivered to Gov. Strickland on April 28, 2009. Included in that

“... look forward to each issue of the Consumers’ Corner newsletter. I am a welfare caseworker and use the information to share with my clients as well as friends and family. It is very important to be informed ... and it is okay to question fees and charges. Thanks.”

Source: OCC Newsletter Survey

document were specific recommendations for protecting families in crisis to ensure they have access to basic utility services. For example, the OCC encouraged utility companies to establish flexibility in terms of negotiating individual payments to avoid disconnection of service. Protections were recommended for citizens who have chronic health issues or who rely on utilities to maintain operation of life support equipment.

The OCC also provided a plan for the development of a free voice mail initiative for homeless people and families in crisis. The initiative’s goal is to provide access to potential employers, housing assistance and other means to maintain or re-establish ties to the community.

Low-Income Dialogue Group dealt with new PIPP rules

The Low-Income Dialogue Group (LIDG) is a coalition of low-income advocates consisting of organizations and agencies from around Ohio that meets monthly to discuss utility issues. The declining Ohio economy has increased the awareness of and need for advocacy in protecting the rights of low-income consumers struggling to pay for essential utility services. The group’s agenda was dominated by the implementation of the revised Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) credit and disconnection rules, which include the Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP) for natural gas customers. In addition, the LIDG was actively involved in the development of the electric PIPP rules administered by the Ohio Department of Development (ODOD).

Implementation of the rules was anticipated prior to the 2009-2010 winter heating season. However, both the PUCO and ODOD delayed implementing the new rules until November 2010 to address programming delays by the utilities. The OCC and many of the other LIDG members opposed the delay because of the hardship many customers were having maintaining utility services.

Low-income consumers will benefit from many of the changes that will be made to the PIPP program. For natural gas PIPP, the payment level will be reduced from 10 percent of a customer’s monthly income to 6 percent to address affordability issues raised by the LIDG. The electric PIPP payment level will change from 5 percent in the winter months and the actual bill in the summer to 6 percent year round, which will reduce the annual amount paid by the average low-income consumer. One of the primary benefits for natural gas and electric PIPP consumers is the aggressive arrearage crediting program. Customers will no longer accrue PIPP arrearages if payments are made every month. In addition, PIPP customers will have the opportunity to have all historical arrearages forgiven over a 24-month period.

In addition to the PIPP changes, the PUCO also approved a new one-ninth payment plan. The one-ninth payment plan provides another option for non-PIPP customers to help avoid getting behind in natural gas and electric payments.



Research Analyst Jim Williams (right) talks with Robert D. Gordon during a CAP meeting in Athens.