

## Introduction and overview

Many of Ohio's residential utility consumers found 2009 to be a particularly challenging year. According to the most recent data, an average 10.3 percent of Ohioans were unemployed, 13.4 percent were living in poverty and many more were affected by tough economic times. Fortunately, the Consumer Services Division (CSD) of the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) offered valuable services to individuals seeking assistance and information about a variety of utility consumer issues.

Research compiled by the CSD staff showed that as 2009 ended, one in 11 Ohio households experienced a disconnection of either their natural gas or electric services because of non-payment of a bill. The OCC's investigators worked with consumers to address their specific concerns and ensure they remained connected to essential services. CSD representatives negotiated alternatives between utility companies and consumers to restore service and/or avoid disconnection to more than 800 households.



Consumer Services Investigator Kim Lee (left) meets with a consumer during the Ohio State Fair.

During 2009, consumers contacted the CSD via the OCC's toll-free number (1-877-742-5622). The CSD distributed educational materials to consumers. In addition to communicating with consumers by phone, the CSD staff responded to e-mails, letters and voice mail messages, as well as to those who walked into the OCC office.

CSD staff also educated consumers about their utility rights and responsibilities, as well as the availability of utility assistance and energy efficiency programs offered by American Electric Power, Columbia Gas of Ohio, FirstEnergy, Dominion East Ohio Gas (DEOG), Duke Energy Ohio and Vectren Energy Delivery of Ohio.

The OCC's call center services led to significant benefits and protections for consumers of several utilities, including choice-eligible natural gas customers. For example, many consumers reported concerns to the OCC via its hotline about a solicitation mailed by Dominion East Ohio Energy (DEOE) targeting DEOG customers. Using the information from consumers, the OCC and other parties filed a complaint with the PUCO about the DEOE's actions. The PUCO eventually ordered DEOE to pay a \$50,000 forfeiture. (See related story in this report's *Natural Gas* section.)

CSD investigators also assisted the OCC in protecting water customers by showing that Aqua Ohio failed to honor a commitment the company made to correct several problems with its billing system. (See related story in this report's *Water* section.)



Compliance Analyst Anita Bolin (right) discusses utility issues with a consumer at the Arnold Sports Festival's active aging program.

## Consumer services representatives addressed many issues on behalf of consumers. A few examples include:

- ▶ Billing and service changes resulting from company-specific filings before the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio. Some of the companies included: Aqua Ohio, Dominion East Ohio Gas, Columbia Gas of Ohio, Vectren Energy Delivery of Ohio, Duke Energy Ohio, FirstEnergy and Ohio American Water;
- ▶ Disconnections of service due to non-payment, outages and/or repairs;
- ▶ Company sales and marketing practices in the natural gas, electric and telephone industries;
- ▶ Affordability of utility bills; and
- ▶ Availability of payment options.