

Consumer Education

Overview

During 2012, the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) continued to provide educational information to consumers through its website, newsletter, and with its outreach and education staff. Consumers continued to express interest in many utility issues, particularly competitive energy choices and utility assistance programs.

OCC also created internal efficiencies by consolidating its government affairs and communications departments into a public affairs department.

Educating consumers about their energy choices

2012 brought Ohio consumers more choices for their electricity and natural gas suppliers. With these choices, consumers have the opportunity to become more involved in decision-making about the costs they pay for their energy.

Choice programs allow consumers to contract directly with an energy marketer for their electricity or natural gas. Consumers should understand that they will continue to pay their local utility to deliver the electricity (through its wires) or natural gas (through its pipelines), regardless of which company the consumer selects for supplying the electricity or natural gas. And the local utility will still be responsible for reading consumers' meters and providing other customer services.

Through its public affairs staff, website and publications, OCC educates consumers about their energy choices. Understanding some of the basics about energy choice can help consumers make educated decisions that best fit their needs. For instance, consumers should understand how to estimate the pros and cons of different energy offers, to choose between different offers or to stay on the utility's standard offer, and to understand cancellation fees.

OCC offers two online publications, *Comparing Your Natural Gas Choices* and *Comparing Your Electric Choices*. These fact sheets are updated regularly as price offers from energy marketers change.

Customers are advised to use their most recent energy bills to find their price to compare (electric bill) or standard offer (natural gas bill) when considering a choice among offers from different energy marketers.

Low Income Dialogue Group

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) continued to lead the Low Income Dialogue Group (LIDG), a network of stakeholders serving the needs of Ohio's at-risk populations. OCC facilitates conference calls to discuss ways to assist consumers in maintaining affordable and reliable utility services.

During 2012, a key issue for the group was monitoring the effectiveness of recent changes to utility assistance programs such as the updated Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP) Plus. PIPP Plus is a program that allows income-eligible customers to maintain their electric and/or natural gas service by paying a percentage of their gross annual household income towards their monthly energy bills.

The LIDG also considered, among other issues, changes to assistance programs including the Summer Crisis Program and Winter Reconnect Order, the number of PIPP Plus customers using medical waivers, and statewide utility disconnection data.