

Consumer Education

Overview

In this time of competitive utility markets, it is critical for utility customers to have reliable sources for objective information about their choices. The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) remains committed to providing Ohioans with resources that will help them make informed decisions for saving money.

OCC continues its focus on educating consumers about energy choices

OCC's Outreach and Education staff met with thousands of Ohioans in 2014. Staff members attended over 500 outreach events. The most requested presentation in 2014 was OCC's "Energy Choice" speech, which helps consumers make informed decisions about their energy suppliers.

Also, we were pleased to be a part of Ohio's tradition of county and regional fairs, as well as the Ohio State Fair. OCC staffed booths and met with fairgoers at the fairs in Allen County, Coshocton County, and Montgomery County. OCC also visited with consumers at the Ohio State Fair and the Farm Science Review.

In this regard, OCC appreciated that two experienced Outreach and Education professionals rejoined the agency. Andy Tinkham and Amy Carles are again speaking with and educating consumer groups in Ohio as part of the OCC Speakers Bureau.

In 2014, OCC began using social media to correspond with consumers. Now you can follow us on Twitter @OhioUtilityUser. OCC also launched a YouTube channel to help consumers better understand their energy choices. The videos can be found on OCC's website at www.occ.ohio.gov/education/videos.shtml.

OCC upgraded some of its communications systems last year. Those upgrades included a new state website domain. Our new web domain is www.occ.ohio.gov. Visitors who use an earlier link to our website will be automatically forwarded to our new location on the web.



Current Ohio Consumers' Counsel Bruce Weston invited first Consumers' Counsel Bill Spratley to send OCC's first tweet.

Low-Income Dialogue Group

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) has worked with stakeholders in a variety of forums to identify and address issues that impact low-income utility customers. One of those forums is the Low-Income Dialogue Group (LIDG). The LIDG has a monthly conference call among low-income advocates involved in utility consumer issues. OCC has facilitated the LIDG for over ten years, including in 2014.

According to the most recent Ohio Poverty Report, poverty in Ohio has increased 58% over the last decade. An estimated 1,797,000 of Ohioans were poor, representing 16% of the population living in poverty. An estimated 340,000 families, or 11.6 percent of Ohio families, were living in poverty. Some of the highest poverty rates in the state were in Youngstown at 36.4%, Cleveland at 35.4% and Dayton at 34.7%.

LIDG members, including the Consumers' Counsel, testified in favor of legislation to protect consumers from the submetering and reselling of utility services.

Another issue of concern was the legislation affecting Ohioans' basic telephone service, in House Bill 490.

LIDG members also participated in workshops and working groups at the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio ("PUCO") that addressed different aspects of Ohio's energy choice programs. The consumer groups sought more emphasis on consumer issues, such as customer education, in those discussions.

The Consumers' Counsel and LIDG members offered comments on the PUCO's Credit and Disconnect rules.

Employee Recognition

Exceptional employees are recognized by the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) directors throughout the year. Employees are acknowledged for their outstanding work on behalf of Ohio's residential utility consumers and for exemplifying OCC's mission, vision and values. From among these recognized employees, OCC's staff annually selects an employee of the year.

2014 Employee of the Year



Laurie Knight

OCC's 2014 Employee of the Year is Laurie Knight, administrative assistant in the Operations Department. Ms. Knight was selected for this honor by her peers after being chosen as employee

of the quarter for October – December 2014.

Ms. Knight assists with human resource functions, employee benefits, payroll processing, fleet management and travel arrangements for the agency. She also serves as secretary to the Governing Board.

With her associate degree in secretarial science from Columbus State Community College, Ms. Knight served the OCC as the executive secretary for Consumers' Counsel Migden-Ostrander. Previously, she was a word processing specialist. Ms. Knight's career at OCC spans the years 1984 to 1994 and 2004 to the present.

On the credit issues, the consumer advocates asked the PUCO to adopt multiple options for customers to demonstrate creditworthiness. And they proposed ways to protect consumers' privacy, such as having utilities and others use alternatives to social security numbers to establish service. In the disconnection rules, LIDG members advocated for additional types of payment arrangements to be offered to utility consumers. And they proposed more uniformity between gas and electric rules for the Percentage of Income Payment Plans where such uniformity could be implemented without harming consumers.

Daniel Duann

Selected as Employee of the Quarter for January - March 2014, Daniel Duann is a senior specialist on capital markets and structures who analyzes, reviews and prepares testimony on water, electric and natural gas cases and other regulatory proceedings. Dr. Duann joined OCC in January 2008.

Deb Bingham

Selected as Employee of the Quarter for April - June 2014, Deb Bingham is a case team coordinator for the electric and water teams. She organizes case work, schedules meetings for the teams, formats legal documents including briefs, discovery, pleadings and testimony. Ms. Bingham joined OCC in September 2005.

Steve Hines

Selected as Employee of the Quarter for July - September 2014, Steve Hines was a principal regulatory analyst for OCC. Mr. Hines joined the OCC in April 1984. He recently retired in November after serving utility consumers with OCC for 30 years. Steve served as the agency's water team leader since March 2006 and was OCC's representative on the water team for the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates.