

Consumers' Corner



Serving Ohio's 4.5 million households

Autumn 2014



Ready your home for a warm, energy efficient winter

As the leaves change color and cooler temperatures settle in, now is the time to ready your home for winter.

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) wants you to know there are ways to make your home more comfortable during the winter months and, at the same time, reduce your energy bill.

You can improve your home's comfort and energy efficiency with a home energy audit. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, a home energy audit can lead to 30 percent savings on your monthly energy bill.

What's important is identifying the areas of your home that need attention. Heat loss can be caused by a lack of appropriate insulation, old windows or insufficient caulking around windows and doors.

A home energy audit can be conducted by a certified home energy professional or you can



Smart Energy HOME ENERGY AUDIT
Reduce energy usage and save on utility bills

CONSUMERS' FACT SHEET

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Americans invest more than 75 percent of their utility dollars on heating, cooling, lighting, cooking and running other appliances in their homes.

Walk room by room through your house and review this checklist to see how many changes have already been made and ones where additional changes can be made to save energy. You may want to post the Smart Energy Home Audit somewhere to randomly check to see if your household has improved over time.

Home Energy Audit Questions	Never	Sometimes	Always
Kitchen			
Is the temperature in the refrigerator set between 37-40°?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the temperature in the freezer set between 0-5°?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are pots and pans covered when cooking?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To clean off dishes, do you scrape away food debris (rather than rinse it from the dishes)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you wash full loads in the dishwasher?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the seal around your refrigerator and freezer door properly sealed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Download the "Smart Energy - Home Energy Audit" fact sheet at www.occ.ohio.gov

choose to perform your own energy audit with a checklist that OCC offers at www.occ.ohio.gov.

Energy auditors who have a Home Energy Professional Certification use specialized equipment and tools such as infrared cameras to display differences in temperature, carbon monoxide meters to check if combustion appliances are properly vented and a blower door that can reveal if air is leaking from your home.

If you decide to have a home energy audit performed by a third party, you might be able to schedule the audit through your local electric or natural gas utility. Ask your utility for a list of programs they offer. Some utilities offer rebates.

When considering whether to purchase a high-efficiency furnace or energy efficient windows, the costs up front could be significantly more compared to other weatherizing efforts like insulation and caulking. However, the decision could pay off in the long run by reducing energy usage. A home energy audit could help

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Heating help is available for consumers in need

For residential utility consumers who are struggling to remain current with their monthly bills, the coming winter months can be especially worrisome.

Last winter was one of the coldest on record and some forecasters predict much of the same for the coming winter months.

A year ago, more than 200,000 Ohioans were disconnected from natural gas service for nonpayment.

There are a number of resources available to help residential consumers stay connected to utility service as the temperature drops. The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) has more details about the many federal and state assistance programs that can help consumers with their energy bills:

- ▶ Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP Plus)
- ▶ Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LiHEAP)

- ▶ Alternative Payment Plans
- ▶ Medical Certifications

Existing fuel funds also are available through local electric and natural gas utilities. OCC's fact sheet, *Utility-funded Assistance Programs Available to Consumers*, can be found at www.occ.ohio.gov or by calling 1-877-742-5622. The fact sheet provides specifics about utility-offered assistance, eligibility guidelines and telephone numbers to call for information.

The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) has issued special reconnection procedures for the 2014-2015 winter heating season. The Winter Reconnection Order, which remains in effect until April 15, 2015, allows consumers to make a one-time payment of up to \$175 to avoid being disconnected or to restore their disconnected utility service.

Some of the guidelines are:

- ▶ Customers who are currently disconnected or facing disconnection can have their electric and/or natural gas

service restored or maintained by making a one-time payment of up to \$175.

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Consumers may benefit in the future from technologies to block unwanted telemarketing calls



For Ohioans who have put up with unwanted or illegal telemarketing calls and scams, there may be help in the future.

In September, more than 30 state attorneys general, including Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine, urged the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to consider whether phone companies can utilize technologies to grant consumer requests to block unwanted calls.

In a letter to the FCC ([http://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Files/Briefing-Room/News-Releases/Consumer-Protection/2014-](http://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Files/Briefing-Room/News-Releases/Consumer-Protection/2014-09-09-Final-Robocalling-Letter-to-the-FCC)

[09-09-Final-Robocalling-Letter-to-the-FCC](http://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Files/Briefing-Room/News-Releases/Consumer-Protection/2014-09-09-Final-Robocalling-Letter-to-the-FCC)), the attorneys general asked if it is legal for phone companies to use technology to block telemarketing calls.

Call-blocking tools such as Call Control, NoMoRobo and Telemarketing Guard allow phone companies to identify and block unwanted sales calls if the telephone customer desires such protection.

But some phone companies have not implemented these protections for consumers. The companies believe that FCC regulations require them to complete all telephone calls.

The National Do Not Call Registry provides consumers with the ability to have their phone number removed from telemarketer calling lists, but the Registry is not guaranteed to prevent telemarketing calls.

Last year the Ohio Attorney General's Consumer Protection Section received more than 2,700 complaints about violations of the Do Not Call Registry. Perhaps in the not-too-distant future new technology will help protect consumers against unwanted telemarketing calls.

By Scott Gerfen

Heating help is available for consumers in need

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- ▶ If service has been disconnected, payment of a reconnection fee of no more than \$36 can also be required. Some utilities charge reconnection fees of more than \$36. In such cases, the balance of the fee may be billed to the customer in the following month.
- ▶ Customers must sign up for a payment plan to pay any remaining past-due balance on their utility bill. The PUCO requires the utilities to offer customers several different payment options.
- ▶ Customers must apply for assistance from the regular Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP). Households with incomes at or below 175 percent of the federal poverty guidelines (\$41,213 gross annual household income for a household of four) may contact their local community action agency and use funds provided through the Emergency Home Energy Assistance Program (E-HEAP) to pay the \$175.
- ▶ The \$175 can be used to establish electric or natural gas service instead of the required security deposit. If the deposit is more than \$175, the remaining balance will be added to the next month's bill.
- ▶ If customers owe past due amounts on both their natural gas and electric bills, the \$175 can be divided between both utilities.
- ▶ Former Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP Plus) and Graduate PIPP Plus customers can take advantage of the Winter Reconnection Order to re-enroll or continue participation in the program. Those customers must pay the balance of any missed PIPP Plus or Graduate PIPP Plus payments that are more than \$175 by the due date of the next bill.

By Scott Gerfen

A career of serving and protecting – OCC Board Member Michael Watkins

Michael Watkins, serving on the Board for the state agency that protects residential utility consumers, is no stranger to serving and protecting the public. He has been a member of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), Lima Lodge, since 1976. And, beginning in 1976, Mr. Watkins served 23 years as a police officer for the City of Lima. Upon his retirement as an officer in 1999, he continued work for the city as a civilian and developed a series of video and audio public service announcements.

This year, Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine re-appointed Mr. Watkins (Republican) to the bipartisan, nine-member Consumers' Counsel Governing Board for a new three-year term. The Board provides guidance to the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), an agency that protects Ohio's consumers of residential electric, natural gas, telephone and water services through legal advocacy and education. Board Members are appointed from

three areas: family farmers, residential consumers and labor (Mr. Watkins' area).

The agency and the consumers it represents have benefited from Mr. Watkins' public service on the Board since he became a member in 2010. Mr. Watkins brings to the Board his ideas and enthusiasm for consumer protection. A recent example was his idea for the agency to feature a display at county fairs that showed visitors the different amounts of electricity that are used or saved with different types of light bulbs. The display proved popular.

Mr. Watkins believes his experience serving and protecting the public as a law enforcement officer has helped him in his service to Ohio utility consumers on the Consumers' Counsel Governing Board.

"Serving on the OCC Board is very similar to serving as a police officer. The general goals are the same,

protect those who cannot protect themselves. The methods are just different."

We are fortunate to work with Mr. Watkins on the affordability of Ohioans' utility bills. He has pleased to recognize the service and dedication he has demonstrated at the local and state level throughout his career in public service.



Smart Grid: Helping consumers control expenses, but at what cost?



Having control over energy use may sound good to many consumers. But is the cost of the technology really offset by what you can save when you are able to determine the best times to use more energy in your home? Over the past couple of years, you may have heard terms related to electric service such as “smart grid.” But what is it? And what will it provide for you, the consumer?

Smart grid is a modernization of the electric transmission and distribution system that includes updated infrastructure, metering and communication technologies. This is designed

to improve electric reliability and bring savings to the electricity system. The smart grid has also been touted to allow consumers to better control consumption, resulting in lower energy bills.

A smart grid contains four components: advanced metering infrastructure, advanced

distribution operations, advanced transmission operations and advanced asset management. The goal of smart grid is to bring greater efficiency and reliability in the distribution of electricity to Ohioans. Some also want the smart grid to offset carbon emissions. Of the four components, advanced metering will be the most noticeable by consumers. You can learn more about the installation process of smart (or advanced) meters in Ohio by reading the Office of the Ohio Consumer Counsel’s (OCC) article from the winter *Consumers’ Corner* (<http://www.occ.ohio.gov/news/2014/newsletters/winter.shtml#story2>).

The OCC has been involved with smart grid in Ohio in several ways. One is by monitoring and participating in requests from the electric utilities related to metering and other items before state regulators. A second way is by participating in the Smart Grid Consumer Collaborative (<http://smartgridcc.org/>) to bring a consumer perspective to the group.

Energy savings is a goal of Smart Grid. But there are concerns that the significant cost of installing the new technology, including smart meters, is not matched or exceeded by the savings and other benefits that consumers may see. This is especially true if consumers are not provided access to all of the features that smart meters can provide, such as time-of-use information.

In addition, concerns over privacy issues with smart meters have led to the desire by some consumers to opt out of having one installed. Recently, several of the electric utilities in Ohio requested the ability to charge consumers who want to opt out of having a smart meter. One utility has requested a \$1,073 one-time fee to allow customers to opt out of having a smart meter. OCC will continue to participate in cases to advocate on behalf of consumers.

By Erin Biehl

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you decide which would be beneficial to your unique situation.

Replacing outdated appliances is another way to reduce energy usage any time of the year. Some utilities offer rebates or other incentives to purchase and install newer, more efficient appliances. In some cases, a utility might remove your old refrigerator for free, as long as it is in working order.

By Scott Gerfen



Scan this QR Code with your smartphone or tablet to request a speaker for your organization!

Ohio fairs provide opportunity to educate consumers

The outreach and education efforts of the Office of the Ohio Consumers’ Counsel (OCC) reached visitors with energy-saving tips at some of Ohio’s great fairs.

In addition to returning to the Ohio State Fair, OCC staffed booths at the Farm Science Review in London, Ohio, the Allen County Fair in Lima, the Montgomery County Fair in Dayton and the Coshocton County Fair in Coshocton.

OCC fact sheets such as *Easy Ways to Save Energy & Money*, *Smart Energy Tips*, and *Vampire Power* provided consumers with valuable energy saving advice. Many visitors had questions or comments about the energy choice program.

OCC publishes weekly updated electric and natural gas choice information, in the form of fact sheets. OCC also provides speakers on this topic and on a range of utility consumer issues for groups interested in learning more. (See page 4 for information on how to schedule a speaker.)

Other topics of interests included consumer protection and utility assistance programs.

Visitors at OCC’s booth also discovered an interactive light bulb display that allowed consumers to compare how much energy different types of bulbs consume. The light board, which features incandescent, compact fluorescent (CFL), and light emitting diode (LED) bulbs, attracted visitors of all ages who enjoyed seeing which bulbs used the most or least energy.

Consumers also could test their energy efficiency knowledge by taking the ‘Are you a Smart Energy Saver’ quiz. We found that most consumers were pretty energy savvy.

“It was great to see the OCC’s booth at the Allen County Fair,” said Michael Watkins, an OCC Governing Board member who represents organized labor. “The staff’s interaction with the public was very positive and the information was very well received.”

The Consumers’ Counsel and staff look forward to next summer and the opportunity to again be part of Ohio’s great state, agricultural, and county fair tradition.

By Ray Foeller and Andy Tinkham



Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

"Your Residential Utility Consumer Advocate"

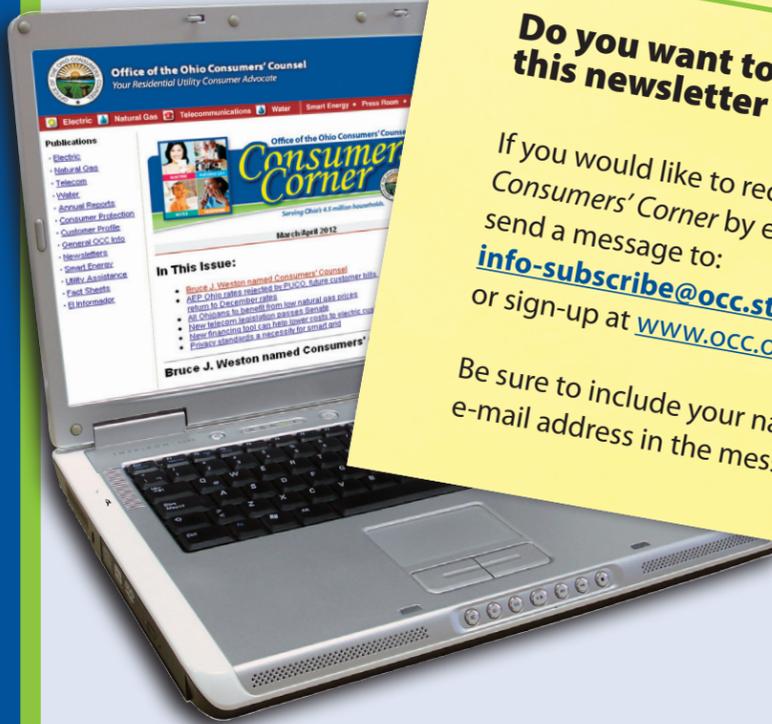
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Consumers' Corner is the newsletter of the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel, the residential utility consumer advocate, serving as a resource for consumers who have questions or would like more information about the services provided by their electric, natural gas, telephone and water utilities.

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OCC Speakers Bureau Request Form

Representatives from OCC can speak to your group about a variety of utility issues, including consumer protections, payment assistance, electric and natural gas choice and more! For a complete list of topics, visit: www.occ.ohio.gov/education/speaker.shtml

Name _____

Email _____

Organization _____

Address _____

City _____ County _____ Zip _____

Phone number _____ Number of participants _____

Topic(s) of interest _____

If you would like a specific date, please indicate and we will confirm your request. _____

Go online to occ.ohio.gov/contact/sbform.php, email us at occspeaker@occ.ohio.gov or

Fill out this form and mail it to: Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel, 10 W. Broad St., 18th Floor, Columbus, OH 43215-3485