

Consumers' Corner



Serving Ohio's 4.5 million households

Winter 2015



Get the Facts: Budget Billing 101

Ohio's natural gas and electric utilities offer optional budget-billing plans. These plans allow consumers to be billed the same amount each month over the year instead of being billed each month based upon actual usage.

These programs are not available to customers on the Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP Plus) or other payment assistance plans. If you are trying to decide whether a budget-billing plan is right for you, the following questions and information might be helpful.

How does a budget-billing plan work?

The utility will calculate a monthly budget-billing payment amount by looking at historical usage for your home, the expected cost of natural gas or electricity over the next year and expected weather.

Based on changes that might occur with these factors, budget amounts may be changed by the utility throughout the year and you may receive a credit or charge at the end of the year to account for over or under-billing. The utility will continue to take regular meter readings to determine a customer's actual usage.

How do I sign up for a budget-billing plan?

Your local natural gas or electric utility can provide you with specific information, including the monthly payment amount. Be certain to ask your utility when the budget-billing period begins and when reviews will be made on your account.

These reviews take into consideration any differences between the budget amount, energy costs and the actual amount of energy used. This helps ensure that the monthly bill is sufficient to avoid overpaying or underpaying your annual energy costs.

What happens if I have a remaining balance?

At the end of the budget year, any remaining

balances or charges may be rolled into a new budget payment amount for the next budget year.

If I buy my natural gas or electricity from a competitive energy marketer, can I still enroll in budget billing?

Yes. However, the budget bill may be based on

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Download budget billing fact sheets for electric and natural gas at www.occ.ohio.gov

Who's new at OCC, again!



Amy Carles and Andy Tinkham both recently returned to OCC as outreach and education program specialists. OCC's outreach and education specialists lead the agency's educational efforts by meeting with consumers, answering consumers' questions and distributing informational materials such as fact sheets, brochures and newsletters across the state. Amy assists

consumers in Northwest Ohio. Andy helps consumers in Eastern Ohio, as well as those at Ohio's colleges and universities.

2004 until July 2011. Amy brings extensive experience with community outreach to OCC from her previous positions in organizations such as Hancock County Saves at OSU Extension, Hancock County, and the Ohio Attorney General's office. She received an associate's degree in sales and marketing from Owens Community College before earning her bachelor's degree in organizational management from Bluffton University.

Andy Tinkham returned to OCC earlier this year. Andy first joined OCC in November 2002 and served until July 2011. Before joining OCC, he worked in various positions at CoreComm and AirTouch Cellular. He earned a bachelor's degree in history with a minor in communications from Otterbein College.

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) welcomes back two familiar faces to our outreach and education team for assisting residential utility consumers.

consumers in Northwest Ohio. Andy helps consumers in Eastern Ohio, as well as those at Ohio's colleges and universities.

Amy Carles returned to OCC in November 2014 after serving consumers from June

Andy and Amy are both available to make presentations on a wide range of utility topics. One of the most popular presentations is energy choice, which helps consumers determine whether or not choosing a

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Basic landline phone service remains a choice for Ohio consumers

Many Ohioans continue to rely upon a basic landline phone to communicate with family, friends and others. Basic telephone service provides access to 911, operator services, telephone relay services for the hearing impaired and caller ID blocking on a per-call basis, among other things, for a flat monthly fee.

It remains the cheapest and most reliable form of telephone service. According to a 2013 survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, roughly 140 million people in the United States – many of whom are seniors or low-income individuals – continue to live in households with landline phones.



The continued availability of affordable basic telephone service for Ohioans was protected last December. Then, the Ohio Senate Agriculture Committee halted work on an environmental and agricultural bill that could have allowed local telephone companies to withdraw basic landline phone service with a mere 90 days of notice to the consumer and the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO).

Supported by telephone companies, this deregulatory legislation was contained in House Bill 490. A number of consumer advocates in Ohio, including the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), recommended that legislators protect consumers by not passing the legislation. Governor Kasich made it known that, if HB 490 passed with the changes to telephone service, he would veto it.

Consumers' Counsel Bruce Weston stated, in testimony to House and Senate legislative committees, that the legislation could have allowed telephone companies to eliminate basic landline service and leave consumers with less reliable service, no service or higher-priced alternatives such as cable or cellular. Ohioans deserve to have affordable basic telephone service as a continued choice for their communications with family, friends and community.

Consumers who are concerned about this issue should monitor legislation. In this regard, new telephone legislation has been introduced as part of House Bill 64 (the state budget bill). The OCC is studying this proposal with consumer interests in mind.

By Scott Gerfen

Updated: Fuel Funds Provide Relief from Energy Bills

If you or someone you know is struggling to pay an energy bill, keep reading.

A number of electric and natural gas utilities offer heating assistance in the form of fuel funds. Fuel funds can help income-eligible consumers pay their electric or natural gas bills. Some funds come from donations by other customers, with the utility matching the contribution or providing some other type of contribution to the fund. Other fuel funds come directly from a utility's shareholders.

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), utilities and others have negotiated shareholder-funded fuel funds throughout

the state in cases at the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO).

A list of fuel funds that are currently available to income-eligible customers of some of Ohio's electric and natural gas utilities is available on OCC's website at www.occ.ohio.gov.

By Ray Foeller



Who's new at OCC, again!

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competitive energy supplier is in their best interest. Another frequently requested topic is assistance for utility bill payments. This presentation discusses the various state and utility-funded programs available to help consumers stay connected. Other topics include consumer protection, managing your utility services, weatherization and understanding your utility bill.

Although these are some of the most popular topics, the outreach and education team is happy to tailor their presentation to the particular needs of consumer groups or organizations.

Amy and Andy not only play active roles in educating consumers, but also partner with other social service agencies to educate both the agencies and those they serve. OCC conducts site visits all across Ohio to make connections and bring awareness to OCC's services for protecting residential utility consumers.

If you are interested in having a representative from OCC speak with your organization, please see the OCC Speakers Bureau Request Form on page 4 or visit OCC's website at www.occ.ohio.gov/education/speaker.shtml.

By Sydney Gale and Kristin Gramza

Get the Facts: Budget Billing 101

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only the local utility distribution charges. You will need to inquire from the marketer if budget billing is an option that is made available for customers on the commodity charges.

Where can I obtain more information?

The OCC makes available fact sheets with more information on utility budget-billing programs for customers of electricity and natural gas utilities, at www.occ.ohio.gov.

By Scott Gerfen



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

Governing Board entrepreneuria

When dealing with utility consumer issues, one word stands out to Ohio Consumers' Counsel Governing Board Member Sally Hughes—strategy.

“Strategy often comes to mind when hearing about all the energy resources we have in the state of Ohio,” said Ms. Hughes. “As homeowners, we need to ask, are our families doing the little things that add up, like turning the lights off when we are not using them and choosing the right energy partner?”

This strategic way of thinking springs from Ms. Hughes' entrepreneurial experience. As President and CEO of Caster Connection, Inc. Ms. Hughes focuses on creating ergonomic and safety solutions by providing the casters and wheels needed to decrease injuries in the workplace. In 1987, she founded the company from the trunk of her car after the completion of a professional singing career. Now a multi-

Study committee begins review of Ohio energy law

The Ohio General Assembly is in the midst of reviewing the state's 2008 energy law. Legislators passed Senate Bill 310 last May, which paused the annually increasing targets for renewable energy and energy efficiency. Legislators created an Energy Mandates Study Committee to review the impact of renewable energy and energy efficiency targets on consumers.

In the last two years, the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel provided legislators with recommendations for continuing the benefits of programs for energy efficiency and peak demand reduction. Those programs can lower electric bills for four million Ohio households.

Energy efficiency programs are generally designed to help consumers use less energy. Peak demand reduction programs encourage customers to limit their electricity consumption during times of high electric demand and high generation costs, such as a hot summer day. Customers typically benefit from these programs because they achieve savings on their electric bills from using less energy, using energy at less expensive times, and paying a lower price for electricity.

These bill-reducing tools are especially important because Ohioans are already paying more on average for electricity than residential consumers in 29 other states, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

The legislative study committee is comprised of six members of the Ohio House of Representatives and six members of the Ohio Senate, with the chairman of the

Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) serving as an ex-officio member. The Committee is tasked with reviewing a variety of issues and reporting to the General Assembly by the end of September 2015.

Senate Bill 310 also states that the legislature will, upon analyzing results of the study, "enact legislation... that will reduce the renewable energy resource, energy efficiency, and peak demand reduction mandates."

Among the issues to be studied by the committee are:

- ▶ A cost-benefit analysis of the renewable energy, energy efficiency and peak demand reduction requirements;
- ▶ A recommendation as to whether electric utilities may authorize charges to consumers for compliance with the standards;
- ▶ Evidence-based principles for reviewing future standards;
- ▶ A review of the anticipated retirement of coal-fired generation capacity; and
- ▶ An assessment of the environmental impacts of the standards.

Other Consumer Issues

Last year, the Ohio Consumers' Counsel and



the Ohio Manufacturers' Association proposed changes in the 2008 energy law, in order to protect the electric bills of Ohio's business and residential consumers. As one example, the 2008 law prohibits electric utilities from collecting "significantly excessive" profits from customers. But utilities should also be prohibited from collecting "excessive" profits from customers.

The Consumers' Counsel also recommended a law to require refunds to consumers when the Ohio Supreme Court or the PUCO determines, after the utilities collect charges from customers, that the charges were unlawful or unreasonable.

In this regard, the Ohio Supreme Court ruled last year that the PUCO could not order the refund that the Consumers' Counsel and the Industrial Energy Users sought even though that was unfair to customers. In the appeal, the Court ruled that the PUCO had no justification for permitting AEP to charge \$368 million (plus interest) to customers. But there was not a refund to customers for the \$368 million plus interest.

By Scott Gerfen

Board Member Sally Hughes brings spirit to OCC

million dollar industrial products manufacturer and distributor, Caster Connection serves thousands of companies throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico and Europe.

Ms. Hughes' strategic mindset and dedication toward solving significant, everyday issues made her an ideal nominee for the Ohio Consumers' Counsel Governing Board.

Attorney General Mike DeWine appointed Ms. Hughes to the Board in 2011 for a three-year term and reappointed her in 2014. The nine members on the bipartisan board are appointed from the three areas of family farmers, residential consumers and labor. Ms. Hughes was chosen to represent Ohio's residential consumers.

"I'm very proud to work for the consumers of Ohio," said Ms. Hughes. "We are able to bring potentially costly problems to light and work

with the Ohio Consumers' Counsel to find ways to reduce or even eliminate the issue."

OCC is one of many organizations to which Ms. Hughes lends her time. She is an active board member for the Ohio Chamber of Commerce, The Wellington School and the Women's Leadership Network Advisory Council for Otterbein University. She is also a member of the Entrepreneurs' Organization, the Women Presidents' Organization and the Women's Business Enterprise National Council.

Even with her vast business and volunteer experience, Ms. Hughes considers her involvement with OCC to be eye-opening.

"At times, as a business owner, I get caught up in what I'm doing and forget that there are many other businesses and individuals having similar challenges—like trying to navigate ways to save money," said Ms. Hughes. "I have met many



folks on the Board who have given me new perspectives on the various types of businesses they run, the impact of energy on their bottom line and how these charges affect families."

We are pleased and privileged to work with Ms. Hughes and benefit from her enlightening experience in our representation and education of Ohio's 4.5 million residential utility consumer households.

By Kristin Gramza



Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

"Your Residential Utility Consumer Advocate"

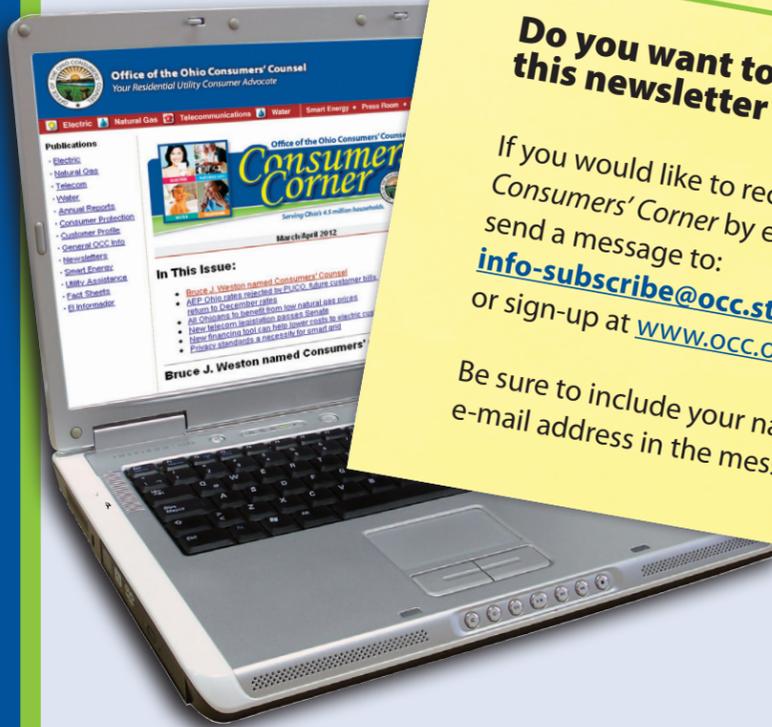
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Consumers' Corner is the newsletter of the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel, the residential utility consumer advocate, serving as a resource for consumers who have questions or would like more information about the services provided by their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

Bruce J. Weston, Consumers' Counsel

Bill Ferriot, Webmaster / Graphic Designer

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2015
Winter
Consumers' Corner



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