



Office of the Ohio
Consumers'
Counsel

Your Residential Utility
Consumer Advocate

CONSUMERS' FACT SHEET

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Consumers' Counsel

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HOW TO AVOID SLAMMING & CRAMMING



Have you read your utility bills lately? If you don't recognize the charges or companies listed on your bill, you may be paying for services you didn't authorize. The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel, the residential utility consumer advocate, has resources to help you understand two scams that consumers may encounter on their bills: slamming and cramming.

Slamming: When your telephone carrier or energy supplier is switched to another provider without your authorization.

Cramming: When a telephone, electric or natural gas company charges you for a service you did not request or authorize.

These practices are both illegal. This fact sheet explains how to protect yourself from being slammed or crammed as well as what to do if you are a victim.

Avoid scams

To prevent scams, always be cautious about sharing sensitive information like account numbers, credit cards, Social Security numbers and, in some cases your phone number. Do not feel pressured to share personal information.

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Request information on product and service offers in writing, read the fine print, and carefully consider your options before agreeing to any offers or contracts.

Be cautious of calling unfamiliar toll-free numbers. Be careful when leaving your name or answering “yes” to any question over the phone. Use discretion when sharing account or personal information with callers who have called you. When speaking with a telemarketer, record his or her name, company, address, and phone number. On your telephone bill, you can block third-party companies from adding charges to your bill. You can also “freeze” your telephone carrier (request that your carrier not be changed). Contact your phone service provider directly to learn about safeguards you can use.

Authorizing changes

Whether salesmen approach you by phone, mail, the internet, or door-to-door, they must receive your permission to change your electric or natural gas supplier by one of the following methods:

- ▶ Verbal confirmation in telephone enrollment, e.g., saying “yes” to a telemarketer;
- ▶ Your signature, e.g., signing a contract with fine print; or
- ▶ Third-party verification, i.e., calling a phone number after signing a contract to confirm you understand the contract’s terms and conditions.

Before your electric or natural gas supplier can be switched, your utility should mail you a notification of the switch. You can cancel this switch within seven days without any penalties. Your utility is responsible for keeping records of services and companies you have authorized.

Being “slammed”

It is illegal for a utility to switch your electric, natural gas or telephone service provider without authorization. This is known as slamming.

Pay close attention to marketing offers about suppliers or government aggregation programs. Many electric and natural gas consumers believe they were slammed but were unaware that their local government had enrolled consumers in a government aggregation program. Government aggregation is a supply option for electric and natural gas consumers, and it is usually done through “opt-out” aggregation. Opt-out enrollment is approved by residents via a ballot issue, and if the consumer does not opt-out, they are enrolled in the aggregation program. For more information about aggregation programs, visit www.occ.ohio.gov/aggregation.

If you have selected a supplier or carrier, their company should appear on your bill. If you pay your natural gas company’s Standard Choice Offer, you may see different suppliers listed on their bill, but “Standard Choice Offer” or “SCO” should always appear on your bill. If the SCO is your chosen rate and is written on your bill, you have not been slammed.

If you have been slammed

If you have been slammed, or you see an unwanted or unfamiliar company on your electric, natural gas, or telephone bill, contact that company and say you did not authorize the change. You should also contact the PUCO and your authorized company and ask to be returned to your original plan. Ask for all charges related to the unwanted switch removed from your bill.

If you have been slammed, your electric, natural gas and telephone utility companies are required to switch you from the slamming company back to your authorized company without payment penalties. Your utility should credit your account for any switching fees. You are not required to pay the alleged slamming company until it has been determined that the switch was authorized.

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The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts.

The state agency also educates consumers about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues.

For more information, please visit the OCC website at www.occ.ohio.gov.



The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel is an equal opportunity employer and provider of services.

The Federal Communications Commission requires additional protections for telephone consumers. If you see a slamming carrier on your telephone bill, you do not have to pay the slammed charges for the first 30 days of service. You also do not need to pay for service with your authorized telephone carrier for 30 days. After 30 days you must resume paying for your service at your authorized carrier's rates, not the slamming rates. Consumers who paid a slamming carrier can also be reimbursed for half of what was paid.

Being "crammed"

When your bill includes charges for a service you did not request, you may have been crammed. The charges for these services are usually small, typically \$9.99 or less, and easy to overlook. Examples of typical cramming charges include:

- ▶ "Pass through charges" not authorized in the contract;
- ▶ "Utility line warranty," or insurance, you did not authorize;
- ▶ Calls placed to unfamiliar numbers; and
- ▶ Other services explained in general terms, such as "calling plan," "internet services," "membership service," or "monthly fee."

If you find unwanted or unfamiliar charges on your bill, **contact your utility** and ask that the charges be removed. You can also contact the company that placed the unwanted or unfamiliar charge on your bill and ask that the charges be removed.

Reporting scams

If your complaint is not resolved after calling your utility, direct your questions to OCC at occ@occ.ohio.gov or 1-877-742-5622. You can also file an informal complaint with the PUCO's online complaint form. It can be found at www.puco.ohio.gov. You can also contact the PUCO with questions or complaints toll free at 1-800-686-7826 or write to them.

**ATTN: IAD
Public Utilities
Commission of Ohio
180 E. Broad St.
Columbus, Ohio, 43215-3793**

Lastly, the Federal Communications Commission also responds to consumer complaints and questions about slamming and cramming. Contact them via telephone at 1-888-225-5322 or file a complaint on their website at <https://consumercomplaints.fcc.gov>.

To avoid these scams, pay careful attention to your bills. If you have questions about your bill, contact your utility, OCC, or the PUCO. The OCC has more information about billing charges, energy suppliers, telephone carriers and consumer scams at OCC's website, www.occ.ohio.gov.

