



## Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

Your Residential Utility Consumer Advocate

# CONSUMERS' FACT SHEET

### Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

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# Consumer Protections in ENERGY CHOICE

Did you know that Ohio consumers have a choice about who supplies their electricity and natural gas? Much like picking out eggs at the grocery store, your household can “shop” between competitive energy suppliers.

After market deregulation of electric and natural gas in Ohio, the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) has represented the interests of consumers and has insisted that consumer protection standards be included in the law. The intent of this fact sheet is to provide information about energy choice and specific factors to consider to ensure you make the best energy choice for your household.

### Energy Marketers

A marketer is a power company that is certified with the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) to purchase and sell power to utility consumers. Sometimes, energy marketers offer a competitive price. Consumers can visit the PUCO's energy choice website, [www.energychoice.ohio.gov](http://www.energychoice.ohio.gov), to compare rates between certified marketers.

Before switching to a marketer, consumers should check the “Price to Compare” on their electric bill and the natural gas “Standard Choice Offer.” These two rates are the amount your local utility company charges to supply utility services. While the deals you are offered by an energy marketer may initially present savings, be sure to check the fine print and use the PUCO interactive

energy choice tool for full stipulations. Sometimes, your rates will only lower for a short period of time then increase above what you were paying before.

Consumers can be reached by energy marketers by phone, by mail, online, or at the door. By Ohio law, these marketers must meet certain criteria:

- ▶ Marketers must be certified in Ohio;
- ▶ Marketers must reveal the type of rate they offer, whether it is a fixed rate, a variable rate, or some other rate option;
- ▶ Marketers must provide a clear and understandable explanation of factors that may cause a variable rate to change;
- ▶ Marketers cannot use false, deceptive or misleading statements when offering any products or services. This includes promises of savings that may not exist, failure to disclose specifics of the contract or providing false information about the energy sources; and
- ▶ Marketers cannot solicit by phone or mail to consumers who request to be on their local utility's “Do Not Contact” list.

The OCC advises against showing utility bills to marketers. Bills contain personal information, such as the consumer's name and account number, and sharing this information comes with risks.

# Consumer Protections in **ENERGY CHOICE**

## **CONSUMERS' FACT SHEET**

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](http://www.occ.ohio.gov).



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

### **Contracts**

Marketers must provide consumers with a contract upon enrollment. If consumers join an aggregated group, they will receive information about the terms and conditions from the aggregated group. Consumers should carefully read the contract and all the marketer's or aggregator's documents before enrollment. The contract must include the following information:

- ▶ The marketer's name, address, and toll-free telephone number ;
- ▶ Switching fees, if applicable, to transfer from the local utility to the new marketer;
- ▶ An itemized list of prices, the amount of recurring and nonrecurring charges, billing cycle, late payment fee information, and other fees;
- ▶ Factors that can cause variable rates to change;
- ▶ An outline of the marketer's complaint handling procedures; and
- ▶ Notice of any automatic renewal provisions.

Before signing a contract, consumers should know the answers to these questions:

- ▶ Is there a fee to sign up? Is there a cancellation fee?
- ▶ How long is the contract?
- ▶ Does the contract automatically renew?
- ▶ Is there a transfer fee if I decide to return to my local utility or switch to another marketer before the contract expires?
- ▶ What happens if I move before the contract period expires?
- ▶ When will service from the marketer begin?
- ▶ Will I receive two bills, one from the marketer and one from my local utility, or just one bill?

- ▶ When will the marketer's charges appear on my bill?
- ▶ Who should I contact about billing issues?

### **Enrollment**

Consumers can enroll with a marketer by mail, fax, door-to-door solicitation, Internet, or phone. After signing a contract, the marketer is required to notify the consumer's local utility within three to five days.

After signing a contract, the local utility will mail the consumer a confirmation notice. This letter will have important details about generation service, including the date of the switch. If the marketer or aggregator's information is correct in the confirmation notice, no further action is required to enroll. Consumers have seven days from the postmarked date on the confirmation notice to cancel their contract without penalties. If the consumer changes their mind about energy choice, or if they believe the contract was made without their approval, they can contact the utility to cancel within seven days.

Seven days after the confirmation notice, consumers will automatically be enrolled with the marketer. For some energy choice programs, it can take up to 45 days to switch service to a marketer or see a change on the utility bill. If consumers choose to cancel the contract after seven days, they may pay early termination fees.

As part of the contract, some marketers review consumers' credit scores, credit history, and utility bill payment records before enrollment.

### **Making your choice**

Make your energy choice an informed choice. For more information about energy choice, visit the OCC's website, [www.occ.ohio.gov](http://www.occ.ohio.gov), and look for fact sheets about "Comparing Your Electric Choices," "Comparing Your Natural Gas Choices," and "Energy Choice 101."