

FAST FACTS for Consumers



UNDERSTANDING YOUR PHONE BILL

Many consumers do not understand the various charges and items on their monthly phone bills. Here's a quick reference that describes some of these local and toll charges:

Federal Universal Service Charge

This fee is part of a federal program to subsidize local telephone service for low-income consumers; schools and libraries; rural health care providers or those who live in areas where the cost of providing telephone services is extremely high.

FCC Local Number Portability Line Charge

This charge covers the cost of technology that allows consumers to keep the same phone number when they change local service providers.

Residential Line Charge

Your local phone bill includes a basic monthly charge for the dial tone that enables you to make and receive calls, maintain the connection between your home and the telephone company's central office, be listed in the telephone book, get a copy of the directory and make a limited number of calls for directory assistance.

Emergency Service Preparation Charge

This fee is collected on behalf of state and local governments to cover the cost of providing 911 access to emergency services.

FCC Charge for Network Access

The FCC allows your local phone company to charge to recover a portion of the costs of completing long distance calls of their local networks.

Intrastate Universal Service Charge

A state program to subsidize the cost of telephone service in areas where the cost is extremely high.

Telecommunications Relay Service

Consumers who have speech or hearing disabilities use a special type of text telephone, called a TTY, to place calls. This fee, which is charged to all customers, covers the cost of providing a "translation" service for calls between TTY's users and people using traditional voice telephone. It also helps to subsidize the cost of specialized telecommunications equipment for people with specific needs.

Optional Services

Optional services can include caller ID, call waiting, voice mail, paging and even Internet and other non-telephone services. The inside wire maintenance plan is sold by local telephone companies as an insurance policy. If the consumer pays this charge each month, a fee will not be charged if repairs are needed. Examples given below:

Three Way Calling

Call Waiting

Caller ID

Inside Wiring Maintenance Plan

Taxes

There is a federal excise tax assessed on telephone service. You may also be charged state and municipal taxes depending on where you live.



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KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Slamming

If your long distance company is switched to another company without your consent, you have the right to be switched back without being charged any switching fees. Changing your service without your permission is called "slamming," and it's against the law.

Read your phone bill carefully as soon as you get it and act quickly if you discover you've been slammed. You're in the best position if you haven't yet paid the slammer.

Cramming

Generally, consumers aren't liable to pay for services they never authorized. If charges for extra services you never agreed to buy, such as voice mail, personal 800 numbers, paging, etc. are "crammed" onto your phone bill, contact the company listed on the page of your bill where those charges are described. Tell it to cancel the service and demand that the charges be removed. You should also demand a refund for any charges you may have paid before you noticed the problem. Let the local phone company that sent you the bill know if you believe you have been crammed. Under voluntary industry guidelines, most local phone companies will remove disputed charges for these services immediately.

Your basic phone services can't be shut off for failure to pay the charges for the miscellaneous services that you are disputing, as long as you notify the local phone company about the problem immediately. Be sure to pay the rest of your bill on time.

Pay-Per-Call Problems

If you find questionable charges on your phone bill for information or entertainment services provided through 900 or 800 numbers, call the company listed on the page of the bill where those charges are described. Under federal law, you have the right to dispute these types of charges if you: (1) didn't make the call (you may be liable for calls that other people made from your phone); (2) were billed the wrong amount; (3) need more information about the charge; (4) didn't get the services that were promised or they were misrepresented; (5) were billed for calling an 800 number without agreeing in advance to be charged; (6) already paid or were owed credits that don't appear on the bill; or (7) moved and the bill wasn't sent to your new address even though you gave the company your new address at least 20 days before the end of the billing period. Contact the local phone company that sent you the bill and explain the problem. Deduct the disputed charges and pay the rest of the bill on time.

If after investigation of your dispute the 900 or 800 number company insists that the charges are legitimate, it may take other action to try to collect the charges. However, your basic telephone services cannot be shut off for refusal to pay for disputed 900 or 800 number pay-per-call services. Your long distance service can be shut off for failure to pay long distance charges and your local service could also be affected. However, your long distance company may be willing to remove all or part of the charge.

