



NEWS & INFORMATION

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Protect Your Phone Bill: Learn to Avoid, Detect and Resolve Telephone Fraud

Everyone can take steps to help themselves avoid being victimized by commonplace telephone marketing and billing deceptions. The Iowa Utilities Board (IUB), toll-free 1-877-565-4450, can often help customers who do fall prey to these unethical and unlawful practices.

Switching a customer's local or long distance provider (slamming) and adding or charging optional services to a customer's account (cramming), without the customer's knowledge or permission, are among the most common fraudulent practices seen. The IUB has lawful authority to fine companies found to be doing this and stop them from providing service in Iowa.

Slamming can be achieved by many means, including direct mail or prize offerings, sweepstakes entries, or other methods. In cramming cases, services like Internet, personal 800 numbers, 900 numbers, caller ID, pagers and voice mail, for example, are often attributed to third party providers that bill customers through local phone companies.

Customers should closely examine their monthly bill statements, watching for any new service entries that they did not authorize or any company name that is unfamiliar. Try to contact the company to request an explanation of any charges that you feel are inappropriate before contacting your local telephone company and the IUB for assistance. The IUB receives slamming and cramming complaints from customers and monitors patterns and practices of these companies, with many complaints being elevated to formal complaint status, where a proceeding is held and companies may be levied fines and/or barred from providing service for unlawful violations.

Other precautions customers can take to avoid being slammed or crammed include reading all fine print for contests, sweepstakes or incentives like bonus checks, free minutes, or raffle entries. These may authorize telephone service changes or additions. Also, turn down pitches from telemarketers or listen intently, being careful not to answer "yes" to anything you do not understand. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. You might also contact your local telephone service provider to safeguard your account by requesting a Prescribed Interchange Carrier (PIC) freeze. There may be a minimal fee for doing this.

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