



CONSUMER BULLETIN No. 04-2 Maine Public Utilities Commission

242 State Street, 18 State House Station, Augusta, ME 04333-0018
Contact: Mary James, (207) 287-2950, e-mail: mary.r.james@maine.gov

Telephone Consumers *Beware* – “Slammers” Are Out There *Read Your Bills and Consider “Freezing” Your Services to Avoid Problems* June 16, 2004

As competition in the telecommunications market grows, consumers should stay alert to avoid getting “slammed.” “Slamming” is the unauthorized switching of your phone service from your carrier to a competitor, and it can happen to your local, in-state toll, out-of-state toll, or international services. Thousands of consumers across the country are slammed each year, but you do not have to be one of them. There are steps you can take to avoid being slammed, and if your service is somehow switched without your approval, to catch the problem quickly.

In many cases, representatives from slammers call consumers posing as representatives from Verizon or AT&T. The slammers claim to be calling to correct a billing error, to offer an especially favorable calling plan, to offer a prize to a “lucky” consumer, or some other seemingly innocuous service or product, and inform the consumer they only need to provide their date of birth and a mailing address to take the necessary action. Once given this information, and armed with the consumer’s phone number, slammers in many cases are able to switch the caller’s phone service without their authorization.

While there are consumer protections in place that help to prevent slamming, in cases like these, in which company representatives are willing to completely misrepresent themselves and the purpose of their call, the more conventional protections do not work.

Carrier “freezes.” You can avoid falling victim to these aggressive and illegal practices by “freezing” – or locking in -- your selection of phone service carrier(s). A carrier freeze places an important barrier between you and slammers, providing protection from unscrupulous carriers and unintentional switching.

Your local phone company is required by state and federal rules to automatically change any of your carriers when notified by a carrier that you have switched to it. “Freezing” your service(s) helps prevent slamming because – before your service can be switched – you are required to give your express authorization to your local phone company to perform any carrier changes on your behalf.

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Placing a freeze. To freeze your service, simply notify your local phone company that you want a carrier freeze and specify which services you want to freeze—local, in-state toll, out-of-state toll, or international. Freezing and unfreezing your preferred carrier selections is easy, and is usually done without charge.

Lifting a freeze. Carriers handle changes for customers with freezes in different ways. Some ask *you* to remove the freeze from your line by calling your local phone company. Others ask you to teleconference with them and your local phone company to lift the freeze. Others give you their identifying code (known as a PIC code) and ask you to notify your local phone company to lift your freeze and switch you to the new code. Check with your prospective new carrier regarding its procedure for changing carriers if you have put a freeze on your services.

The only downside of carrier freezes is that there is an extra step in the process when you *actually* want to change carriers. You must first give your new carrier permission to change your service, and then give your local phone company permission to lift the freeze.

Read your bill. Another important step to catch a slammer quickly is to read your bill thoroughly each month. If you see you are receiving services from a company you have not selected, call that company and tell them to refund any charges incurred so far as well as any carrier change fees (and keep notes for your records). You should then contact your preferred carrier to ask to be switched back to them and be placed back on your original (or a better) calling plan. Finally, call the Public Utilities Commission to file a complaint against the company.

You should also know that Maine regulations state that if you are slammed, the slamming company is not entitled to any revenue from serving you. In addition, you will be absolved of charges from any carrier for the first 30 days after the slam.

Reading your bill carefully each month will also help you catch any “crammers” – companies that have added charges to your bill without authorization. Crammers illegally add extra charges on local phone bills – sometimes for months at a time -- for things like voicemail, internet access and other telecommunications services that the consumer never ordered, and in many cases never received. While the PUC has created some protections against cramming, reading your bill is your best defense against crammers.

For more information on carrier freezes, slamming, and cramming, or to report a slamming or cramming violation, call the Public Utilities Commission toll-free at 1-800-452-4699.