

Welcome to the Consumer Telephone Guide

When buying landline phone service for their home or business, consumers should be aware of several issues and questions to ask to make sure they are getting the best service to meet their needs. This guide provides a basic overview of important information consumers should know about landline service. For more detailed information about telephone service, visit the Department's website: www.mass.gov/dtc.

The Basics

Telephone calls are generally in one of three categories: Local, which are in your immediate area as determined by the plan and provider you choose; Regional, which are outside the "local" area and may include additional charges; and Long Distance, which can be in-state and out-of-state (across area codes, for example), and may also include additional charges.

Choosing a Plan

You must choose a "local" telephone provider in order to get access to services. You can choose one provider for all your phone calls, or you can select different providers for different types of calls. Many calling plans offer flat monthly rates. Some plans offer low-cost local service and charges for regional or long-distance calls, and these plans may be attractive to consumers not making many long-distance calls.

Be aware that many "options" may come with additional charges. Those include: Caller ID, voicemail, three-way calling, non-published phone numbers, and more. Also, there are surcharges, fees and equipment charges that might be added. When you call your service provider, make sure you know exactly what you are getting – and what you are paying for.

Finally, your telephone bill will include charges in addition to your base rate, some state or federal taxes, and some surcharges added by your provider, including a federal excise tax, sales tax, subscriber line charge, and 911/disability access fee. When you get the bottom-line cost of your plan, make sure those charges are included in the price that you are quoted. For a more detailed description of taxes, fees, and charges, visit www.fcc.gov.

Beyond a Telephone

Some telephone providers bundle their services with cable and Internet services. These bundles might include additional charges beyond the quoted monthly rate, and may include a contract agreement that locks you into those services for a set period of time. Before signing an agreement on bundled services, know the additional



costs for HD television, cable boxes, modems, and other charges, and know what the penalty might be if you exit the contract before it expires. Many providers will charge an "early termination fee" (ETF) that applies when you cancel all, or even one part, of your service before your contract expires. Ask questions about your ability to make changes to service levels within your bundle, and be certain you know how much the ETF is, and when it applies.

A Few More Things

It is possible that your phone service may be exposed to scams known as "slamming" and "cramming." When your service is "slammed," your service is switched to another provider without your permission. When your service is "crammed," your bill includes charges for services you did not authorize. Check your bill each month to make sure it is accurate. If your bill has charges that you did not authorize, contact your provider, and the DTC.



Be aware that many companies, especially cable companies, offer "digital voice" using Voice over Internet Protocol technology. VoIP calls use the customer's broadband connection to complete calls. In the case of a power outage, VoIP phones require battery backup power to remain

in operation. Be sure to ask your carrier what, if any, differences you can expect.

Federal law allows you to keep your current phone number when you change providers, as long as you remain within the local exchange. When switching providers, be sure to tell your phone provider if you want to keep your existing phone number.

Lifeline and Linkup

These federal programs make access to basic phone service affordable to low-income consumers who are enrolled in a government program like MassHealth, Medicaid, Fuel Assistance, Food Stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and others. Qualifying households receive a \$30 discount on installation through Linkup, and a reduction of as much as \$18.39 per month on basic phone service through Lifeline.

Contact your government program for more details, or visit our website, www.mass.gov/dtc, which has more information and application forms available.

Who to Call for Help or Information

The **Massachusetts Department of Telecommunications and Cable** regulates phone service providers for calls made in the state. Visit the DTC website at www.mass.gov/dtc, call (800) 392-6066, or email us at consumer.complaints@state.ma.us.

The **Federal Communications Commission** handles out-of-state calls and international phone calls. Call (888) 225-5322 or go online at www.fcc.gov.

Dispute charges on your phone bill first with your provider. If the matter is unresolved, contact the DTC or FCC for more help.



John C. Chapman
Undersecretary

MAKE THE CALL



A Consumer's Guide to Purchasing Phone Service



Charles D. Baker
Governor

Karyn E. Polito
Lieutenant Governor



Karen Charles Peterson
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