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PSC WARNS CONSUMERS ABOUT TELEPHONE 'SLAMMING'

Four local telephone companies have informed the state Public Service Commission that many of their customers have recently been receiving calls from long-distance carriers who are using deceptive telemarketing to try to obtain permission to switch the customers' carriers.

According to Nemont Telephone Cooperative, Project Telephone, Valley Telecommunications and Range Telephone Cooperative, telemarketers who falsely claim to be representatives of the local phone company are contacting customers and telling them they are calling to "verify their long distance carrier," or "consolidate their local and long distance phone bills into one bill." The customers are not being told that the real purpose of the calls is to obtain authorizations to change their long distance carriers.

The local phone companies suspect at least some of the questionable telemarketing is being done by a company called American Phone Services because some customers recall that name was mentioned during the telemarketing calls. The PSC will investigate whether that company's telemarketing complies with its requirements for obtaining customers' authorization to switch carriers. If customers have been "slammed," the slamming carrier is not entitled to payment of any charges for calls made by the customer during the period of the unauthorized switch.

The PSC advises consumers to listen carefully when they receive telemarketing calls about their phone service and not to agree to anything if they are not sure of the purpose of the call. Consumers should read their phone bills carefully each month. If they see any unfamiliar carrier listed, they should call their local phone company for information.

If a consumer is "slammed," he or she should immediately contact the local phone company to report the slam and to request to be reconnected to the consumer's preferred carrier. Then the consumer should call the slamming carrier and inform that company that its service was unauthorized, that it should be cancelled immediately and that no payment for any charges billed by the slamming carrier will be forthcoming unless the carrier can provide proof of the consumer's authorization for the carrier change. Additionally, any "change charges" (the charge for switching companies) must be taken off the consumer's phone bill.

The Montana PSC is available to assist state residents with slamming complaints. The PSC address is PO Box 202601, Helena MT 59620-2601. The PSC phone number is 1-800-646-6150.

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