Make the ringing stop: Protecting you from robocalls

By Teresa Murray, PIRG’s consumer watchdog

Bob Sopko used to get about 20 illegal robocalls a week. You’re probably familiar with the ones that filled his voicemail box: Your car warranty is about to expire. You owe back taxes to the IRS. You can reduce your credit card interest rate. The types of scam calls go on and on.

A couple of months ago, Sopko’s phone stopped ringing so much. He gets only about five calls a week now. “They have dropped significantly,” said Sopko, a university entrepreneurship program director who lives near Cleveland.

Then there’s Cheryl Carstens of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. She gets up to 25 illegal robocalls every day. Her callers also seem concerned about her expiring car warranty—for a Toyota she’s never owned.

What’s the difference between Sopko and Carstens? Sopko’s phone company has completely adopted new caller ID technology that’s aimed at reducing illegal robocalls. Carstens’ phone company has not.

Our consumer watchdogs are on the case

Across the country, 2021 was supposed to be the year when we could start answering our phones again without worrying whether the call is an effort to rip us off, steal personal information, or sell us something we’d never want. ( Heck, you’re not even supposed to be getting these calls anyway if you’re on the Do Not Call Registry.)

Cellphone and landline companies were required under federal law to implement new robocall-fighting technology by June 30. But this past fall, our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund’s Illinois PIRG Education Group began to investigate how well this law is being implemented in Illinois.

Illinois PIRG Education Group’s consumer watch-dogs launched a national campaign to protect consumers from illegal robocalls. And the results were clear: Some companies are doing it right, while others are not.

In Illinois, Cellphone companies have not been following the law in their handling of illegal robocalls. Our state’s consumer advocates found that all of the companies they tested have violated the law. The companies were not disabling calls or forwarding them to voicemail or blocking them from being sent to their networks.

Illinois PIRG Education Group’s consumer watch-dogs are committed to protecting Illinois consumers from illegal robocalls. We are working to ensure that all companies are complying with the law and are taking steps to reduce illegal robocalls.

We encourage Illinois consumers to report any illegal robocalls they receive to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and to the Illinois Attorney General’s Office.”
Fund made an alarming discovery: Out of the 49 largest phone companies nationwide (those that can serve 1 million customers or more), only 16 had reported to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that they had completely implemented anti-robocall technology.

What does this mean? It means the industry isn’t doing nearly enough to fight the crime that for years has caused so much heartache and aggravation among consumers across the country. Illegal robocalls cost Americans $10 billion a year in fraud, according to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC)—plus an additional $3 billion a year in wasted time, according to the FCC.

Of course, not all robocalls are illegal or malicious. We sign up for some helpful robocalls: Our prescription is in at the pharmacy. Our kid’s school is closed.

Phone calls are generally illegal if:
- It’s a telemarketing call with a recorded message, unless the caller has written permission from you allowing the company to call you.
- It’s a call aimed at deceiving or defrauding you.
- It’s a call from a legitimate company that you haven’t done business with and it’s calling you even if you’ve registered your number on the federal Do Not Call Registry.

The news isn’t all bad: With the new federal regulations taking effect, scam calls dropped by 29% nationwide from June to August, according to YouMail, a leading robocall filtering company. But there’s still more to be done, especially as we’re seeing new threats such as robocalls not covered by the law and more targeted scam calls thanks to data breaches.

What’s next

PIRG’s Consumer Watchdog team is continuing to look into what the FCC and phone companies are doing to rein in robocalls. And we’re sharing our findings to spur further action.

For instance, many carriers are not required to comply with the new law to reduce robocalls until June 2023. The FCC admits that robocalls are still on the rise for some smaller providers. But Americans need better protections from robocalls now, not two years from now—so we’re urging the FCC to require all companies to comply as soon as possible.

In the meantime, my team and I have put together 18 tips to help you reduce robocalls and protect you and your loved ones from scams. Find the guide online at: illinoispirg.org/robocalls.

PIRG’s Teresa Murray spoke with news outlets about new federal regulations protecting Americans from robocalls—and what consumers can do to protect themselves when those regulations fall short.

Our Mission
When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, Illinois PIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. Illinois PIRG’s mission is to deliver persistent, results-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.
“But chlorpyrifos will still be allowed on golf courses and turf, which means we need to do more to convince decision-makers to protect Americans from this toxic chemical.”

RIGHT TO REPAIR

Apple, Microsoft agree to make devices easier to repair

If you’re among those who don’t want to add your broken iPhone to the 416,000 mobile phones Americans throw away every day, we have good news.

Apple, once one of the most visible opponents to the Right to Repair movement, on Nov. 17 reversed its longstanding policy against making spare parts, repair instructions and repair software tools available to customers and independent repair shops. The commitment is part of a new Self Service Repair program, and it came just days after the company pledged to stop deactivating Face ID for iPhone screens repaired independently.

Apple’s announcement also followed a similar one made by Microsoft in October—marking a month of unprecedented progress for the Right to Repair movement in the corporate sphere.

“This win was made possible by years of work on the part of Right to Repair advocates—including 33,000 messages from PIRG supporters urging Apple to end its unfair repair policies,” said Nathan Proctor, senior director of PIRG’s Right to Repair campaign.

The commitment came on the same day as a key deadline in a PIRG-backed shareholder resolution that our partners filed with the company.

TAKE OUR POWER BACK

Illinois energy bill fails to stand up for consumers, maintains pro-utility status quo

When utility power and profits go unchecked, consumers lose—but when Illinois lawmakers had a chance to bring much-needed reforms to our state’s energy policy, they failed to step up.

On Aug. 31, the Illinois Assembly passed a sweeping energy bill that not only extends formula rate policies, which guarantee utility profits, but also provides Exelon (parent company of the utility ComEd) with a $694 million nuclear bailout. The legislation fails to adopt key reforms that Illinois PIRG, other consumer advocates, and Gov. J.B. Pritzker have called for, such as checks on gas utility bill surcharges and an end to utilities’ ability to charge customers for utility “charitable” giving.

“In the wake of the ComEd bribery scandal, the Illinois General Assembly had the opportunity to make a clean break from the tainted energy policy approach of the past,” said Illinois PIRG State Director Abe Scarr. “Utility companies were in the negotiating room while utility critics were shut out, resulting in legislation that fails to meet the moment.”

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Federal bill would get single-use plastics out of our national parks

Seeing plastic trash while enjoying time in nature is a frustrating reality we’ve learned to live with. A new bill could change that.

On Oct. 10, U.S. Rep. Mike Quigley (Ill.) introduced the Reducing Waste in National Parks Act, which would ban the sale and distribution of single-use plastics such as bottles, utensils, straws and packaging in national parks. The bill would drastically reduce the 70 million pounds of waste the National Park Service handles each year; a 2013 review of Yellowstone National Park found that plastic water bottles represented half of the park’s entire solid waste load.

“We cannot safeguard our most protected lands from waste pollution until we get rid of the threat posed by single-use plastics,” said PIRG Zero Waste Campaign Associate Juliana Clejan. “It’s time to take action and end the sale of the most harmful and unnecessary products infiltrating our national parks.”