

Extra News Online

Residents' Discount Phone Plan Scrutinized

Mix-up At One Nursing Facility Prompts Call For Review

A discounted phone service program that helps low-income long term care residents acquire cell phones or landline services came under fire recently when a resident of a nursing facility in New York was denied the service under questionable limitations.

According to a statement from Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), a resident of the Regency Extended Care Center in Yonkers was denied a subscription to the service, known as Lifeline, because it is only able to enroll one consumer per household address.

In his statement, Schumer notes that “despite the fact that the center houses multiple residencies, the nursing facility residents have been shut out of the telephone service because the facility has been mistakenly classified as one address.”

In response to the incident, Schumer wrote the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) in June asking it to clarify to the providers of the Lifeline program that current federal rules allow residents of multi-residency buildings—even if residents do not have their own apartments and therefore share an address—to sign up for government-sponsored phone service.

“This is a classic example of a bureaucratic misunderstanding getting in the way of a successful program,”

Schumer wrote in the letter. “Lifeline service is only available to one consumer per household, but the Extended Care Center in Yonkers, which houses multiple people, is being mistakenly identified as a single home. I believe that once the FCC reviews this situation they will recognize the mistake and allow residents in group homes to apply for the service.”

The federal government offers two types of universal service programs for income-eligible telephone consumers: Lifeline, which helps reduce the monthly cost of local telephone service, and Link-Up, which provides discounts to reduce landline service connection costs or wireless activation fees.

In his letter to FCC, Schumer urged Chairman Genachowski to review the circumstances, reconsider the decision to deny services to its residents, and actively work to ensure that other residents of multi-family homes are not shut out of the program.

Schumer further noted that “in a world that is becoming increasingly dependent on the ability to communicate quickly, it is important that low-income consumers are not denied access to telecommunications technology. Cellular telephones are important tools that help consumers, especially those that are elderly, remain in close contact with family members and emergency

services personnel.”

In addition to asking the commission to examine the circumstances surrounding the denial, Schumer requested an investigation of “any other instances of residents of building with multiple households, so that we can ensure no one is denied access to cellular telephone service.”

According to FCC, more than 1,500 telephone companies in the United States and its territories participate in the federal Lifeline and Link-Up Programs for income-eligible households. Eligible consumers are encouraged to contact their local telephone service providers or other authorized carriers to request an application form and obtain further instructions on how to apply for Lifeline and Link-Up discounts in their state.

Facilities interested in helping residents participate in the program can find more information about landline and wireless carriers authorized to provide the discounts through the state public utility commission or utility consumer advocate office at the following links:

■ State Public Utility Commissions: www.naruc.org/commissions.cfm.

■ State Utility Consumer Advocate Offices: www.nasuca.org/about/membdir.php.

—Meg LaPorte