



It's Your Money

Another Unscrupulous Scam

Utility supplier scams have been around for a while, but unfortunately they aren't going away nor getting any less dangerous. These scams don't exclusively target seniors, but we are an attractive prey for unscrupulous shysters. Seniors were raised to be polite. We may think it's rude to hang up the phone or close the door on someone, and scammers can exploit our hesitation to disconnect. Additionally, many seniors tend to be lonely and more eager to talk to a stranger on the phone or at the door. So, how do we recognize and avoid becoming victims to this latest scam?

It is important to understand that it is NOT your utility perpetuating these scams. If you look at a gas or electricity bill from your utility company you will see that the total bill is made up of two components, both a delivery fee and a supply fee. In all cases the utility company always provides the 'delivery' component. However, in Ohio, all utility customers are allowed to select the gas or electric 'supplier' of their choice. If you elect not to pick an alternate supplier, you will typically stay with the utility for both 'delivery' and 'supply'. If you DO pick an alternate supplier then the utility will continue to 'deliver' your gas or electricity, but 'supply' of that gas or electricity will then be supplied by this alternate com-

pany of your choosing. That's where the problem starts for many of us.

One of the current twists employed by Ohio utility alternate 'suppliers' is to go door to door trying to get Greene County citizens to switch 'suppliers' from whoever you previously chose. The typical scam tactic uses well-dressed young people carrying an electronic tablet who show up at your door. They have a rehearsed script that goes something like this: *Good afternoon. We have noticed that a recent change was made to your AES (or CenterPoint) account, and we would like to discuss it with you. Do you have a recent bill that we can review with you?* The purpose of this opening line is just to gain your confidence and let them see who you are currently signed up with for the 'supply' of your gas or electricity. If you show them the bill, they proceed to tell you there is a problem, and that they can fix it for you if you would like them to do so. If you are still taking the bait, they will sign you up, on-the-spot, for their company as your new 'supplier' (again, the delivery will not change from AES or CenterPoint, only the supply). Unfortunately, in every instance, if you sign up with this new supplier, you will be paying a **higher** rate than you can get through legitimate means elsewhere, and your new

'supplier' will almost certainly have an early termination fee that will discourage you from switching back to a legitimate company.



So how should you handle this latest scam? Step one: do not engage ANYONE who shows up at your door asking about your utility bill; neither AES nor CenterPoint will show up at your door. Feel free to just close the door. Step two: contact the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) and submit a complaint. You can submit the complaint either online at puco.ohio.gov/help-center/file-a-complaint or by calling (800) 686-7826, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday.

If you do fall for this scam and are tricked into signing up for a different supplier, don't panic. By law, you can reverse this transaction within 7 days of the scam by calling either AES or CenterPoint and explaining that you have changed your mind on the recent change to your account.

As always, you can solicit help from your Greene County Council on Aging at (937) 376-5486 if you are uncomfortable submitting the complaint yourself, or you need help reversing the fraudulent sign up if you are tricked. Just gather the facts of the scam and give us a call.