

The Active Consumer

Speaking Up To Keep Phone Costs Down

(NAPSA)—Voicing your opinion could help keep phone costs down.

That's the word from consumer groups that say decisions in Washington, D.C. could affect the price of a phone call or the cost of surfing the Web for millions of people—but Americans are speaking up.

Here's a closer look at the issue and how you can get involved:

Controlling Costs

If you think of a telecommunications company, chances are you're picturing a multimillion-dollar corporate giant. But millions of Americans actually receive their telecommunications services—wireless, Web, phone and cable or satellite—from small businesses with about 15 employees.

As Washington considers passing new regulations on telecommunications companies, experts say the rules could force smaller companies to spend millions installing new systems and training personnel on new procedures. That cost would likely be passed on to the consumers.

Focusing On Service

"Forcing new regulations on small businesses with limited resources will likely cripple—rather than enhance—the consumer protections sought by policy-makers," says Michael E. Brunner from the National Telecommunications Cooperative Association (NTCA).

Indeed, Brunner says that small rural telcos already have consumer safeguards in place—and that many rural customers opt for a local provider specifically because of those safeguards and service policies.

Brunner adds that imple-



There are ways people can help keep the cost of phone service down.

menting similar regulations in the past led to higher consumer costs and disruption in rural service, as well as extreme customer dissatisfaction.

For instance, customers, who for years had paid their bills in person, were suddenly told they had to show photo ID when conducting transactions.

Smart Solutions

The Communications Act mandates the use of the Regulatory Flexibility Act by regulators as a means of ensuring fair treatment of small businesses and their consumers. Brunner's group says Congress should also use the act as a guideline for future legislation.

"Telecom policies should be flexible, since the industry is made of large, midsize and small carriers," says Brunner. "Protecting consumers' privacy and wallets is important. And that's why we can't rely on a one-size-fits-all solution."

Voicing An Opinion

For more information or to learn how to contact legislators about this issue, visit www.ntca.org.