

**Written Testimony for the Senate Finance-Workforce Subcommittee  
Public Utilities Commission of Ohio – House Bill 64  
Presented by: Nina Keller, Assistant Director,  
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The Area Agency on Aging District 7 serves ten counties in southern Appalachian Ohio including Adams, Brown, Gallia, Highland, Jackson, Lawrence, Pike, Ross, Scioto and Vinton. Our services help seniors and those with disabilities remain independent in their homes with a variety of programs that promote their health and well-being.

Our region is located in the most rural part of Ohio, covering over 5,100 square miles of relatively undeveloped countryside, and is characterized by high unemployment, high poverty levels, and a significant exodus of younger people leaving the area to find employment.

It is because of our rural area that we have serious concerns about the telecommunications provisions in the budget bill (HB 64), which would allow AT&T and other major telephone companies to withdraw their basic landline service to Ohio telephone customers. There are a large number of residents in our area who rely completely on landline services due to a lack of or poor cell phone service in the area, and/or a lack of funds to purchase a cell phone and cell phone service.

In 2012, 98 percent of our PASSPORT consumers were dependent on landline phone services. PASSPORT, our largest Medicaid-waiver program, provides in-home services designed to help seniors who are at risk of nursing facility placement live safely at home. We also provide a number of other home and community-based services that reach out to many seniors and those with disabilities in very rural areas with limited to no cell phone service.

A large number of our consumers are low-income, rural and elderly individuals who need their landline service as a lifeline to connect with friends, family and caregivers, 9-1-1, police and fire, in addition to the fact that many of our consumers rely on emergency response systems (“Lifeline”) for peace of mind should an emergency or situation arise where they need immediate assistance. Discounted emergency response

system services for low-income landline customers could be jeopardized as telephone companies that accept federal funds for Lifeline programs must offer basic telephone service to qualify for the funding. Discounted services are extremely important for our low-income consumers who depend on their emergency response system. Landline phones are a vital component for these devices. Wireless alternatives may not be reliable and can carry a larger expense that many of our consumers will not be able to cover.

The legislation would allow an individual customer of a phone company to file a petition with the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) objecting to the termination of their basic local exchange service for the reason that they do not have “alternative reasonable and comparatively priced voice service.” Although this is a process available to voice concerns, the burden is placed upon the consumer, not the company, and must be acted upon within 30 days after the notice is provided to the customer. Our concern is that the notice may be buried in the fine print of a bill insert or on the back of the bill. There is a concern that customers may not see the notice or understand the notice, in addition to the time needed to research and evaluate alternatives and file a legal petition with the PUCO. All of these factors could be especially challenging for many of our consumers to voice their concerns regarding their phone service, which is a true lifeline for their health and safety.

While we support the move to greater technology and access, the fact stands that there remain a large number of individuals, primarily in rural areas, that depend totally on landline services for their health and well-being. Individuals simply have no other way to communicate outside of their landline phone services. Eliminating this basic service could create a health and safety risk to many of our consumers and could lead to less reliable and more expensive phone services for individuals who are already on a limited income.

Our ask is that significant consideration be given to the fact that many rural Ohioans have limited to no cell service and that many of our consumers are on very fixed incomes and unable to afford the charges that are associated with cell phone equipment and service. The impact that eliminating landlines will have on many rural Ohioans is something that should be seriously considered as a true health and safety issue for many individuals that rely on this basic need that is still very much relied upon in our rural area.