

Mr. Chairman and members of the Public Utilities Committee, I am Norman Wernet, President of the Ohio Alliance for Retired Americans Educational Fund. I submit this write testimony on behalf of the 450,000 organized retirees of Ohio's labor movement. We represent those who built the Ohio economy and for the most part want to live out our retirement years here in Ohio as part of that economy.

The Ohio Alliance for Retired Americans Educational Fund opposes HB 402 because of its threat to lifeline services and its goal to eliminate basic landline and broadband internet service that are essential to older Ohioans' ability to communicate with friends and family, caregivers, and in emergencies. HB 402 is yet another attempt in by large very profitable telecom corporations (especially ATT) in their decade long push to abandon vulnerable customers while continuing to absorb smaller providers in the market.

It is all well and good to want to promote competition or to move ahead with newer technologies but to do it at the cost of the older citizens who are vulnerable and depend on reliable mechanics of communication is unconscionable. Older citizens purchase basic landline and broadband service as a guarantee of the ability to communicate their needs. Many rely solely on basic landline and broadband internet service because of their limited income and the lack of reliable cell or other digital technologies in their area.

It is our understanding that many of the automated notification systems available to older Ohioans with major medical conditions who live at home today work only with landline technology. The ability to live outside an institutional setting is an essential cost savings to the taxpayers of Ohio. Diminishing older and disabled Ohioans' ability to live independently will cost us all much more than is gained by this very profitable corporation in the end.

The rush for consumption of spectrum bandwidth presents its own problems now because of over usage. Basic landline service is reliable and trusted by the older customer and currently not subject to limitations because of over usage. Preservation of basic internet service has become essential for Older Ohioans to remain in the community given the development of tele-medicine and the shrinkage of localized medical facilities.

Given the ability to raise the basic rate multiple times many more, older customers will be priced out of the ability to buy a basic service. The telecom industry is using its lobby power, we all are obligated to pay for, against the interest of us its customers in a four fold attack at the federal legislative and regulatory, and state legislative and regulatory mechanisms. ATT's proposal now before the Ohio PUCO, for instance, and in this legislation, appears contradictory to its own position vis-a-vis the FCC proposal to ban resellers from the market and granting exclusivity to facilities based providers such as ATT while it proposes abandoning that same territory in Ohio. As the Ohio Alliance for Retired Americans Educational Fund representing 450,000 retirees, we are confused by this, and concerned that nearly 11,000 retirees and seniors in Ohio will be without an essential utility.

HB 402 is a model of what is wrong with utilities in Ohio. Instead of price coming down from market competition and services improving because of efficiencies, this proposal promotes less service to the customer, with lower quality, no assurance of service or access to service within reasonable time for whatever reason there is an outage, and higher cost. Telecom corporations like ATT have been given concessions by the General Assembly and the PUCO in the past in exchange for certain basic service delivery obligations, HB 402 does not promote this exchange and leaves us as retirees and seniors vulnerable. Promoting profitability for the corporate citizen with money for voice is one thing but this legislation appears to tilt against the human citizens whom the legislature was also elected to represent.

Safety, cost, and access to basic communication are being sacrificed for the sake of “competition” among businesses but not to the advantage of the basic customer. The Ohio Alliance for Retired Americans Educational Fund asks that this proposal be permanently tabled. In the alternative we ask that basic landline service be maintained for the vulnerable populations of older and disabled Ohioans by the current providers of service or by applying consumer protections of landline service to all service providers wishing to do business in Ohio.

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