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Helping Older Persons With Legal & Long-Term Care Problems

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February 12, 2018

**Before
The Ohio House
Public Utilities Committee**

Testimony in Opposition to House Bill 402

**by
Michael Walters**

**On Behalf of the
Pro Seniors, Inc.**

February 12, 2018

Greetings Chair Cupp, Vice-Chair Carfagna, Ranking Member Ashford, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding this legislation that impacts Ohioans as residential telephone consumers, especially with regard to basic wireline telephone service. We oppose House Bill 402.

I manage Pro Seniors, Inc.'s statewide legal hotline, which provides free legal advice for Ohio senior citizens. As I am sure the committee is aware, senior citizens particularly rely on landline telephone service. Pro Seniors' legal hotline is evidence of this. Our office receives approximately 6000 calls each year relating to seniors needing legal help. The overwhelming majority of those calls come from landline telephones. Thus, this Bill will have the most dramatic effect on seniors.



Many low-income seniors have access to affordable reliable telephone service solely through the Federal Lifeline program, which provides basic local landline exchange telephone service at an affordable rate. Even senior citizens who are not low income primarily rely on landline service. Seniors need reliable, affordable telephone service to communicate not just with their families and friends, but also with medical providers. For homebound seniors the landline telephone is a lifeline.

As the Ohio legal service organization dedicated solely to advocating for seniors, Pro Seniors desires to protect access to affordable, reliable basic telephone services for elderly Ohioans. We are particularly concerned about the potential negative impact on the costs and reliability of telephone service, especially for Lifeline customers, resulting from House Bill 402.

To allow telephone companies to increase their monthly charges for basic service to consumers by 20 percent (including Lifeline customers) annually could have a financially devastating impact on elderly and low-income Ohioans who rely on telephone service to manage critical needs.

We are also concerned about the potential negative impact on quality of telephone service, should this Bill be enacted in its current form. The elimination of service quality standards for basic service in R.C. 4927.08, the elimination of a requirement to offer “adequate” basic service, the elimination of the potential for treble damages currently allowed under the law for committing unfair and deceptive practices, and the elimination of adequate oversight by the Public Utilities

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Commission over telephone carriers, all combine to essentially insulate telephone companies from accountability for failure to provide adequate basic telephone service.

Elderly and poor Ohioans need access to affordable, reliable, basic telephone service. This Bill would significantly diminish telephone companies' obligations to provide affordable, reliable, or even basic telephone service to Ohio consumers. Pro Seniors would ask that House Bill 402 not be adopted.

That you for consideration of this testimony.

Sincerely,

PRO SENIORS, INC.

Michael Walters

Michael A. Walters
Legal Hotline Managing Attorney