

Hammer time at Comcast!

As the legal advocate for consumers of natural gas, electric, and telephone services in the District of Columbia, the Office of the People's Counsel (OPC) has received numerous complaints about the quality (or lack thereof) of services offered by utility companies. Many consumers are frustrated by the rapid increase in rates and decrease in services offered. Ratepayers are beginning to feel as if they are paying for a Lexus LS Sedan and driving off the lot in a Pinto Hatchback!

The Washington Post recently featured an article (“Taking a Whack Against Comcast”^{*} – <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/17/AR2007101702359.html>) on one Virginia consumer who was fed-up with Comcast's poor customer service and decided to take matters into her own hand – Literally! After being the victim of several missed appointments, a botched repair job, and enduring lies from representatives, 75-year old Mona Shaw made a visit to her local Comcast office armed with her husband's claw hammer. Although many have thought about acting upon the scene that took place in the Manassas Comcast offices that day, few of us would actually follow through with the plan. According to Neely Tucker of *The Washington Post*, once Ms. Shaw revisited her local Comcast office, “BAM! She whacks the keyboard of the customer representative. BAM! Down goes the monitor. BAM! She totals the telephone. People scatter, scream, cops show up....”

As the public advocate, we hear frustrations like this everyday, but as a lawyer we in no way condone this type of behavior and note that this is an illegal course of dispute resolution!

However, we can all agree that this incident should serve as an object lesson for ALL public utilities that consumers are FED UP and ready to FIGHT BACK (without a blunt object of course)! Consumers are tired of dealing with rude employees, technicians demonstrating a blatant disregard for their customers' time by missing service appointments, outsourced call center representatives, and arbitrary service charges. To assist consumers dealing with poor quality of service, OPC offers the following–

Tips for How to Handle Problems with Public Utilities

TIP #1: Attempt to Negotiate Any Problems with the Company First.

- If the utility representative you make initial contact with cannot resolve your complaint, ask to speak to a supervisor.
- Once you speak or attempt to speak with a supervisor if you are unsatisfied with the outcome...

TIP #2: Contact the Office of the People's Counsel

- OPC is the legal advocate for utility consumers and may assist and/or represent individual consumers in disputes with utility providers.
- OPC accepts complaints related to problems with service, billing, and other issues related to public utilities in the District of Columbia

^{*}Tucker, Neely, “Taking a Whack Against Comcast: Mona Shaw Reached Her Breaking Point, Then for Her Hammer”, *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2007, C01

- Complaints may be filed by:
 - Visiting OPC Monday through Friday, 8:45 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. at 1133 15th Street, NW, Suite 500;
 - Calling OPC at (202) 727-3071; or
 - writing at the address listed above.
- Consumer complaint resolution may be handled on a formal or informal basis. Informal resolution is a negotiated agreement between the consumer and the utility company. If an informal resolution is not reached, a formal hearing may be requested before the Public Service Commission. In some cases, an OPC attorney may represent the consumer at the formal hearing.

TIP #3: Avoid Disconnection of Utility Service for Nonpayment; It is More Difficult to Resolve Complaints if Service has been Disconnected

- Do not delay! Contact the utility company and attempt to negotiate an agreement or call OPC immediately.

TIP #4: Know Your Rights as a Utility Consumer

- As a DC utility consumer, your rights to quality service and fair rates are clearly outlined in the D.C. Consumer Bill of Rights, which can be accessed by visiting the OPC website at www.opc-dc.gov and clicking on the Consumer Rights tab.