

SERVING OUR SENIORS



Serving Our Seniors

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Sue Daugherty, Executive Director

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My name is Sue Daugherty, Director of a geriatric social service based in Sandusky, Ohio known as Serving Our Seniors. We work to help older adults of Erie County to maintain their independence. 18% of Erie County is age 65+.

Affording utility costs, being able to interpret your utility bill and making sure your utility problem doesn't get swept under the rug are important matters in later life. Much of the work we do is successful because of the help that we receive from the Ohio Consumers Counsel.

I am here today to voice my opposition to the severe proposed budget cuts to the OCC. And I am here to explain why I am opposed.

- **This cut to the OCC's budget is not going to resolve Ohio's budget woes!**
- This budget cut is not going to increase Ohio's revenues enough to resolve Ohio's budget woes.
- This budget cut will cut the legs out from under the only body that stands up for consumers. Consumers need a legal

advocate and legal counsel who understands this very complicated industry. The OCC fills this role for us.

- We the consumers don't have the knowledge and the understanding to argue against what the industry wants.
- The PUCO cannot do it for us. They simply are not consumer oriented. They may try to be. But trust me, I speak from personal experience they are not my advocate on a utility issue.

The OCC is not a duplication of service. The OCC provides information and advocacy that the PUCO does not provide. Let me share 3 examples:

1. When older adults were getting electric bills from Ohio Edison that they could not afford, they wanted to be able to interpret their electric bill. As much as I wanted to help them. I couldn't. The regulated utility industry is just too complex to understand. It requires an electric analyst to clearly interpret an Ohio Edison electric bill and the OCC supplied the perfect educator/analyst to meet this need. His name is Jim Williams and he did a phenomenal job.

It was standing room only. There was seating 48 and we stuffed in an additional 10 older adults who wanted to understand what they were paying for and why they were paying those costs.

2. Their education led to another public forum that Serving Our Seniors sponsored. It was a dialogue about the First Energy all electric discount and what they can do to have the all-electric discount permanently restored.

The PUCO was invited 2 months in advance. They declined our invitation. This forum was also well attended. 300 older adults came to learn about this regulated all-electric utility issue. Our State Senator was on the panel, our State Rep was on the panel, our neighboring county's State Rep was on the panel, First Energy event sent their External Affairs Manager to be on the panel – but the PUCO did not feel the need to speak to the consumer on this issue. Remember, this is the agency that is supposedly as interested in representing the consumers best interest as the OCC. It was the PUCO that didn't feel it was necessary to communicate with the consumer..

The absence of the this regulatory body's absence was obvious and it was felt. Our State legislators frequently answered the consumers questions with – “That's a question the PUCO can answer”. But they were not there.

3. Serving Our Seniors then made arrangements to hold another public forum on the All-electric issue. This time I called the Governor's office and asked for their assistance in helping me get a PUCO commissioner or knowledgeable PUCO staffer to participate in our public forum.

The PUCO agreed, and again another 300 older adults attended the public forum.

In just these 3 instances, it is very clear that the PUCO does not see their consumer as their constituent; not does it feel an allegiance to the consumer. For this reason, we need the OCC to explain utility issues from the consumers' perspective and to argue in opposition to changes in regulations that are harmful to utility consumers.

Whether the PUCO realizes this or not, the PUCO needs the OCC. Every story has two sides. Just as a judge who has the responsibility to make sound decisions on difficult issues, he does so by listening to both sides of the argument.

The PUCO needs to be presented with both side of the argument. The PUCO can't be given just one side of the utility argument and be expected to deliver a well thought-out, balanced decision when they have only heard one side! –
COULD YOU?

I use to work as a nursing home administrator. I paid a bed tax to finance the nursing home ombudsman program – just as consumers pay a fee on our utility bill to finance the OCC.

I can tell you that although the ombudsman was being paid by me – the nursing home administrator – they knew their role was to be an advocate. And they were.

The Ohio Consumers Counsel knows what it is being paid to do, and I am happy to see that they get the fee I pay to see that my best interests are represented.

Don't cut the OCC's budget.

It's not going to resolve Ohio's deficit

It's not going to improve Ohio's revenues

It's only going to make affordability for the residential and small business consumer spend more than is necessary. This has already been proven by the successes the OCC has already achieved in favor of the consumer.

I need the Ohio Consumers Counsel – personally for my residential rights; and I need the Ohio Consumers Counsel to protect the rights of the older adults who struggle to stay connected without a subsidy.