

# THE ALERT

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## International Phone Scams Can Cost Plenty

Calling an unfamiliar phone number could wind up costing you high charges for an international call.

Consumers are being lured into calling the international

phone numbers through ads and other promotions for interesting or important information, warns the Federal Trade Commission.

You may be promised information and entertainment

services such as prizes, psychic readings, chat lines or employment opportunities.

What you are not told is that some of the numbers you are asked

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## Here's A New Number to Call for Legal Help

The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland has a new telephone system that allows you to dial in directly to the Senior Helpline.

The new direct dial number is 216-861-5479. You may call between 1 and 4:30 p.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

The Senior Helpline serves persons aged 60 and older who need help with legal problems. The types of problems we can help with include wills, health care directives, evictions and other housing matters, Social Security and SSI

eligibility, termination and overpayment issues, and problems with food stamps, Medicare, Medicaid, welfare and health insurance.

We may be able to help with other problems, too. Call us to find out if we can assist you with any legal problem you have.

If you use a TTY, please phone 216-696-3081 to leave your name, number, date and time of your call. Someone will return your phone call.

**Call the Senior Helpline  
at its new number:**

**216-861-5479**

**1 to 4:30 p.m.**

**Tuesdays-Thursdays**

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The Older Persons Law Office of The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland  
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to call are costly international "pay-per-call" numbers where a part of the long distance charge pays for the information or entertainment that you get.

The companies want you to call often and they try to keep you on the line as long as possible since the more you call and the longer the call the more profit they make.

Each country sets its own phone rates and there are no limits on the per-minute charge.

Although usually you must dial "011" to make a call to a foreign country, in some places such as the Caribbean countries you need only dial the area code and the number. For instance, an "809" area code in the Dominican Republic may look like a domestic long distance call, but international phone rates are charged.

The foreign calls are different from calls to "900" numbers. The Federal Trade Commission's "900 Number Rule" requires that a caller to a "900" number be clearly told the cost of the call before the charges start. There are no such protections when you dial international pay-per-call numbers.

*Be skeptical about area codes you don't recognize; especially "809" (Dominican Republic), "758" (St. Lucia) or "664" (Montserrat).*

Often you don't know that you made an international call until you are surprised by a whopping phone bill. You could end up with your telephone service cut off if the international charges aren't paid.

To protect yourself:

**(1) Be skeptical about area codes you don't recognize; especially "809" (Dominican Republic), "758" (St. Lucia) or "664" (Montserrat). Check your phone directory or call the operator to make sure the area code you plan to dial is for a location in the U.S.**

**(2) Don't be deceived by "urgent" messages left on answering machines, pagers or on computer e-mail asking you to call an unfamiliar number because a family member has been injured, or you have won a prize or there is a problem with your credit.**

**(3) Never, but never, give out your credit card or Social Security number to anyone you do not know unless you have initiated a call for your own purposes.**

**(4) Be wary of ads for information or entertainment services which make such claims as "not a 900 number," "no premiums apply," or "LD rates apply." That suggests the call is cheaper than a "900" call when, in fact, it could cost a lot more.**

**(5) Ask family members not to make calls outside your immediate area code unless they get your permission first.**

**(6) Promptly check your phone bill for long distance charges you don't recognize. If it contains an unauthorized call, contact your local telephone company and your long distance carrier. The phone company may provide a credit or refund, even though it is not required to give credits or refunds.**

## Credit Card Insurance? You May Not Need It

If you are considering buying credit card insurance, make sure that you know what you are getting.

Some telemarketers sell insurance that covers fraudulent use of credit cards. You really don't need that kind of insurance since the Federal law already protects you.

**The law limits your liability to \$50 if you made a reasonable effort to notify the card issuer within a reasonable period of time that your card is lost or stolen .**

Another type of insurance may pay only the minimum card payment each month if you're disabled or lose your job. There may be a waiting period. The premiums may cost more than the monthly benefits.

Some credit card protection plans provide notice to the card issuer if your card is lost or stolen and arranges for a new card. **You can do that yourself for free.**

Don't give your card number to anyone selling credit card loss protection over the phone. You could be talking with a con artist who will use your number to make purchases.

If you charge only minimum amounts, consider whether buying credit card insurance makes sense.

Make sure you know what you are buying before signing on the dotted line.

*For more about credit cards, turn to Page 3.*

# New Law Shines Light on ATM Fees; But Some Credit Card Fees May Go Unnoticed by Consumers

Starting October 1, new Federal rules require that users of ATMs at institutions where they don't have accounts be informed of any fees before they complete any transactions.

Actually the requirement took effect on March 9, 2001, but compliance did not become mandatory until October 1. The time lag was to give institutions time to post the fee information as well as to make changes to show the fees on screens of automatic teller machines (ATMs).

**On the other hand, new or even old fees charged by credit card companies may not be so apparent or easily understood.**

Card issuers have been raising or adding new fees. While these costs are explained in mailings and credit card agreements, some consumers aren't aware of them until their bills get really high.

For instance, some firms, rather than charge an annual fee, tack on a maintenance monthly fee (often from \$6 to \$12) whether you use your card or not.

"Many people don't blink twice over \$6 a month—it doesn't seem so bad," says a credit card specialist with the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC).

"But if they stopped to think that they're paying \$72 a year just to be able to carry a card, they'd realize they could have done better by paying a lower annual fee," said the specialist.

**Another area to watch is transfer of balances on one card to another card that promises a supposedly better deal.**

Suppose you transfer a \$100 balance at a special 2.9 percent annual percentage rate (APR) to a card that otherwise charges a 15% APR and you already have a \$200 bill from earlier purchases on that second card.

When you send in a \$50 payment it likely will be applied to the new \$100 balance you transferred rather than the "old" high rate \$200. That, of course, benefits the card company and costs you more than if it applied to the old \$200 balance.

Before you transfer a balance, you should phone the credit card company to find out how your payments will be applied. You may decide it doesn't make sense to do a transfer.

If you use your card to get cash from an ATM machine, that is considered a loan. You should be aware that you will be charged interest immediately with no grace period. In addition, you are likely to be charged a transaction fee by your credit card company and by the bank that owns the ATM.

Fees for late payments now cost as much as \$29. Sending in less than the minimum payment can be considered a late payment that could mean you not only get charged the fee, but may have your interest rate raised or your card cancelled.

If you know your payment is going to be late and you have the money available, it may be better to phone the credit card company and authorize a deduction from your bank account before the deadline. That could cost as much as \$10, but that is usually cheaper than a late payment fee.

**So what is a consumer to do? Read and understand a credit card offer before you sign. And just as important, carefully review your monthly billings or other notices for fee increases, rule changes or unauthorized charges.**

If you don't check each monthly bill, you will not even know whether you are being charged a monthly fee or you are being charged for purchases you did not make.

Shop around for the best deal you can get before you sign up for a credit card.

Starting October 1, new Federal regulations will make it a little easier to see and understand key information about a credit card's cost on the application form and mail offers.

For example, the new rules require that card companies tell you the annual percentage interest rate in 18-point type **which is this large.**

*Read and understand a credit card offer before you sign.*

## What Would You Like to See in The Alert?

What topics would you like The Alert to cover in upcoming issues?

We are open to your suggestions.

Drop us a line telling us about subjects you think would be helpful to persons aged 60 or older and would be of interest to you. Mail to:

The Alert  
The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland  
1223 West Sixth Street  
Cleveland, OH 44113

## Unordered Merchandise Is Yours to Keep

From time to time, we all get merchandise that we have not ordered.

For instance, you may get four pair of pantyhose—along with a bill—after you respond to an advertisement offering you a free “trial” pair.

Once you get unordered merchandise, you may begin getting notices insisting that you make payment or your credit rating will suffer.

What can you do?

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) says that you do not have to pay for merchandise you didn’t order. Federal laws prohibit mailing unordered merchandise to consumers and then demanding payment.

Here are some questions and answers about dealing with unordered merchandise.

**Q. Am I obligated to return or pay for merchandise I never ordered?**

A. No. If you get merchandise that you didn’t order, you have a legal right to keep it as a free gift.

**Q. Must I notify the seller if I keep unordered merchandise without paying for it?**

A. You have no obligation to notify the seller. However, it is a good idea to write a letter to the company saying that you did not order the item and, therefore, you have a legal right to keep it for free. This may discourage the seller from sending you bills or dunning notices or it may help clear up an honest error. Send your letter by certified mail. Keep the return receipt and a copy of the letter for your records. You may need it later.

**Q. What should I do if the unordered merchandise I received was the result of an honest shipping error?**

A. Write the seller and offer to return the merchandise, provided the seller pays for the

postage and handling. Give the seller a specific and reasonable amount of time (say 30 days) to pick up the merchandise or arrange to have it returned at no expense to you. Tell the seller that you reserve the right to keep the merchandise or dispose of it after the specified time has passed.

**Q. Is there any merchandise that may be sent legally without my consent?**

A. Yes, You may receive samples that are clearly marked free. You also may receive merchandise from charitable organizations asking for a contribution. You may keep such shipments as free gifts.

**Q. Is there any way to protect myself from shippers of unordered merchandise?**

A. When you participate in sweepstakes or order goods advertised as “free,” “trial,” or “unusually low priced,” be cautious. Read the fine print to determine if you are joining a “club,” with regular purchasing or notification obligations. Keep a copy of the ad or catalog that led you to place the order, too. This may make it easier to contact the company if a problem arises.

**Q. Where can I go for help in dealing with unordered merchandise problems?**

A. First try to resolve your dispute with the company. If this doesn’t work, contact the Better Business Bureau, the State Attorney General’s Consumer Office or the local U.S. Postal Inspector. The Direct Marketing Association, 6 East 43rd Street, New York, New York 10017, also may be able to help you. File a complaint with the FTC by calling toll free 1-877-FTC-HELP or 1-877-382-4357; TTY 202-326-2502.

**SENIOR CITIZEN CENTERS AND LEGAL AID OFFICES**

**CUYAHOGA COUNTY**

For information or to make an appointment in Cuyahoga County  
 phone the Senior Helpline  
 at 216-861-5479  
 on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday between 1 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.

**EAST SIDE**

**WEST SIDE**

Buckeye Senior Center  
 11802 Buckeye Road  
 216-491-8450

Hough Opportunity Center  
 8555 Hough Avenue  
 216-421-5400

Lakewood Office on Aging  
 16024 Madison Avenue  
 216-521-1515

Collinwood Community  
 Center  
 813 East 152 Street  
 216-541-4400

Maple Heights Senior Center  
 15901 Libby Road  
 216-587-5481

Metro Health Hospital  
 2500 Metro Health Drive  
 216-778-5551

Emeritus House Senior  
 Center  
 (at Indian Hills)  
 1554 East 193 Street  
 216-289-8586

Martin DePorres Center  
 1264 East 123 Street  
 216-268-3909

Parma Senior Resource Center  
 7001 West Ridgewood  
 440-885-8155

Fairhill Institute  
 12200 Fairhill Road  
 216-421-1350

Murtis H. Taylor Center  
 13422 Kinsman Avenue  
 216-283-4400

West Side Legal Aid Office  
 3408 Lorain Avenue  
 216-961-6630

Goodrich-Gannett Center  
 1368 East 55 Street  
 216-432-1717

Stella Walsh Recreational  
 Center  
 7345 Broadway Avenue  
 216-441-0111

**DOWNTOWN**

Downtown Legal Aid Office  
 1223 West Sixth Street  
 216-687-1900  
 Extension 5336  
 TTY: 216-696-3081

Helen S. Brown Senior  
 Center  
 16100 Euclid Avenue  
 216-761-8410

Woodland Branch  
 Cleveland Public Library  
 5806 Woodland Avenue  
 216-623-7109

For information or to make appointments outside Cuyahoga County  
 phone the offices listed below

**LAKE COUNTY**

Lake-Geauga Legal Aid Office, 8 North State Street, Painesville  
 440-951-7240 from Cuyahoga County and western Lake County  
 440-352-6200 from other parts of Lake County or 1-888-808-2800

**LORAIN COUNTY**

Lorain County Legal Aid Office, 538 West Broad Street, Elyria  
 440-323-8240

**ASHTABULA COUNTY**

Ashtabula County Legal Aid Office, 121 East Walnut, Jefferson  
 440-576-8120

**The Legal Aid Society  
of Cleveland  
1223 West Sixth Street  
Cleveland, Ohio 44113**