

Hills phone company denies misquoting rates

BY MARY RODRIQUE
STAFF WRITER

Nationwide Communications Inc., a Farmington Hills phone company that provides operator and long distance services to pay phones, has been cited for violating Michigan's consumer protection act by the state attorney general's office.

The company is specifically cited with providing inaccurate rate quotes and falsely represent-

ing that it was not one of several companies the state took action against last year for excessive rates — charges the company denies.

"The attorney general has filed a notice of intended action under the consumer protection act," said Chris DeWitt, spokesman for Attorney General Frank Kelley. "We've heard from Nationwide. There are ongoing discussions. Whether there will be a settle-

ment and no lawsuit, it's hard to say."

Attempts to contact Richard Makana, NCI president, were unsuccessful. But Jeff Iabba, an attorney representing NCI, denied any wrongdoing on the part of the telecommunications company.

"The substantive issue is that we're misquoting rates. NCI handles approximately 100,000 to 200,000 calls a month," said Iabba. "If an operator misquotes, if there's a mistake, I can't imagine it was done intentionally."

Kelley alleges that NCI's rate quotes have omitted charges for collect calls, credit card calls and the per call commissions paid to the owner of the property on which the pay phone is located. He further states that consumers have been overcharged, as much as \$4 per call, in comparison with NCI's quoted rates.

"Our rates are published and we abide by them," said Iabba.

"We have received the notice of intent (from the attorney general's office) and we've requested to see support for their position."

It is also alleged that Nationwide's sales representatives have misled potential customers by suggesting that the company was not among long distance providers who were warned last year to lower their rates.

"Initially the attorney general cited seven or eight companies last year and we were not one of them," said Iabba.

DeWitt says that's technically correct, but that NCI was cited in a second sweep later last year.

"We believe there is a sufficient pattern of problems with NCI," said DeWitt. "This was not an isolated incident or two."

Currently, the state Legislature is considering Senate bill 722 which calls for limited regulation of alternative operator services (AOS) companies. Among its pro-

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is a captive customer, usually having no choice but to use the phone that happens to be available. Consumers often are not supplied with enough accurate information to arm themselves," Kelley said.

Although Kelley supports the proposed legislation, he urged the legislature to go further and enact tougher and more comprehensive measures to protect consumers from being ripped off.

Consumers can dial a 1-800- or other access numbers to reach the long distance carrier of their choice before entering their calling card number. Merely entering the calling card number is not sufficient to reach the carrier.

Consumers with questions should contact their preferred carrier for instructions. Another option becoming popular is to use a prepaid calling card available from coin dealers and other vendors.

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