



News Release

Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Ohio Consumers' Counsel, social service agencies, private technology firm partner to introduce free voice mail to Ohioans in 419 area code

Columbus, OH - July 21, 2009 - Access to free voice mail is now available to individuals in the 419 area code of northwest Ohio who do not have a telephone because they are without a permanent residence or cannot afford one.

This new service is being made available through the combined efforts of the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the state residential utility consumer advocate, Leader Technologies Incorporated and the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks (OASHF).

Leader Voice Mail will enable people without phone service to retrieve messages from a personal telephone number which can be accessed from any touch-tone telephone, including wireless, or by using the Internet.

Regional community service organizations in northwest Ohio, such as the Northwestern Ohio Community Action Commission (NOCAC) and others, will make the service available to their clients on an as-needed basis.

"The OCC is pleased to support this vital new technology for citizens in northwest Ohio and we hope that it can be successfully expanded throughout the state," Ohio Consumers' Counsel Janine L. Midgen-Ostrander said. "At a time in a troubled economy when more people are finding themselves in difficult circumstances, citizens need to be able to maintain contact with the vital services they need. We appreciate the contributions made by Leader and the OASHF in supporting this important outreach."

How the service works

Users of Leader Voice Mail will apply for the service with any of the participating social service agencies in their area. Eligibility is determined on a case-by-case basis, according to the client's level of need. They will receive a personal telephone number in the 419 area code of a voicemail box which can be accessed from any touch-tone telephone (including wireless) or by using the Internet.

Clients will receive a wallet-sized card containing basic information needed to access their messages, which will include their individual userID, personal phone number, the toll-free number for them to access their messages and the Web site address for retrieving messages online. There is no cost to clients using Leader Voice Mail and the service is available to them as

long as they need it. Clients who have prepaid cellular phones will be able to save critical minutes by making use of the service.

Filling a critical need

For Ohio citizens without access to telephone service, voice mail can assist them in maintaining contact with necessary vital services. Messages can be left and retrieved at a secure, anonymous location, enabling clients to search for or maintain a job, find a place to live, or stay in touch with family, medical professionals or social service agencies.

Many assistance organizations have been overwhelmed by the number of people without a telephone who are seeking a variety of services or assistance during a difficult economy, either because of job loss or home foreclosure. Social service agencies will be better able to respond to their clients' individual needs by having the ability to leave messages for them, thereby making their efforts to serve displaced Ohioans more efficient.

Sharing the vision

Leader Technologies Incorporated® develops and markets merged voice and Web communications products and has sponsored the services for this project. "We've invented new Web 2.0 technologies that do a better job of combining traditional phone service with the Web," said Michael McKibben, founder and chairman of the Columbus-based software development and marketing company. "Our technological innovations were the catalyst that made the OCC and OASHF vision come to life. Some projects like this are just the right thing to do." Leader provides audio conferencing services to companies, governments and small businesses across the United States.

The Ohio Benefits Bank is a public-private partnership between the OASHF and the Governor's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to provide outreach to Ohioans in need of assistance in electronically filing their federal and state income tax returns and gaining access to tax credits and other state and federal benefits.

"For many of the families standing in our food lines, voicemail (let alone a phone) is a luxury. This valuable service will ensure that families trying to obtain employment will have a new resource where employers and others may be able to leave them a message," said Jason Elchert, Director of Outreach and Education for the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks.

The OCC offers a link on its Web site (www.pickocc.org) to the Leader Web page as well as other vital covers programs for lower income Ohioans to assist with their utility services.

Social Service agencies who wish to participate in the Leader Voice Mail Program for their clients can contact the OCC at leadervm@occ.state.oh.us.

Individuals interested in signing up for Leader Voice Mail may contact their social service agency. If they are not currently a client of a social service agency, they can contact the OCC at 1-877-PICKOCC (1-877-742-5622) for a list of participating agencies in their area.

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About the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts. The state agency also educates consumers about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues and resolves complaints from individuals. To receive utility information, brochures, schedule a presentation or file a utility complaint, residential consumers may call 1-877-PICKOCC (1-877-742-5622) toll free in Ohio or visit the OCC Web site at <http://www.pickocc.org/>.

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