

The Columbus Dispatch

SafeLink cell-phone users offered more free minutes

Two new plans for low-income people join existing 68-minute program

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BY TIM FERAN

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TracFone Wireless Inc. has added two new options for low-income people using its government-subsidized cell-phone service.

The new choices under the SafeLink program are:

- 250 free monthly minutes, which may not be carried over to the next month, one text per each minute and a free cellular handset.
- 125 free monthly minutes, which may be carried over, one text per each minute and a free cellular handset.

They join the original offering, made under the federal Lifeline program, of 68 free monthly minutes, which are allowed to carry over, three texts per each minute, international long distance to more than 100 destinations and a free cellular handset.

In addition to the free monthly airtime minutes for one year, SafeLink offers coverage area throughout the United States; LG, Motorola, and Samsung cell phones; 411 at no additional cost; unlimited access to 911; and voice-mail, call waiting and caller ID.

TracFone had come under fire recently after consumer advocates worried that customers would almost inevitably need time beyond the 68 free minutes offered in the original plan.

Once the free time was used, customers were charged 20 cents a minute in the original plan, a cost that two advocacy groups considered excessive.

Lawyers for Ohio Poverty Law Center and Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc./Western Ohio filed a public-records request with the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio two weeks ago to find out how many people exceed the 68 minutes and by how much.

The new plans are "a welcome development," said poverty law center staff attorney Michael Smalz. "The 250 minutes of time plan is a lot more useful and a lot more effective than the 68 minutes plan. It certainly benefits those Lifeline customers who use the TracFone service and under the old plan would have been stuck with 68 minutes.

"It certainly seems to be more than a cosmetic change. It's a real substantial improvement."

Smalz said the poverty advocacy groups would continue to pursue the customer usage data, at least for the time being.

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