Make the ringing stop: Protecting you from robocalls

By Teresa Murray, PIRG’s consumer watchdog

Bob Sopko used to get about 20 illegal robocalls a week. You’re probably familiar with the ones that filled his voicemail box: Your car warranty is about to expire. You owe back taxes to the IRS. You can reduce your credit card interest rate. The types of scam calls go on and on.

A couple of months ago, Sopko’s phone stopped ringing so much. He gets only about five calls a week now. “They have dropped significantly,” said Sopko, a university entrepreneurship program director who lives near Cleveland.

Then there’s Cheryl Carstens of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. She gets up to 25 illegal robocalls every day. Her callers also seem concerned about her expiring car warranty—for a Toyota she’s never owned.

What’s the difference between Sopko and Carstens? Sopko’s phone company has completely adopted new caller ID technology that’s aimed at reducing illegal robocalls. Carstens’ phone company has not.

Our consumer watchdogs are on the case

Across the country, 2021 was supposed to be the year when we could start answering our phones again without worrying whether the call is an effort to rip us off, steal personal information, or sell us something we’d never want. (Heck, you’re not even supposed to be getting these calls anyway if you’re on the Do Not Call Registry.)

Cellphone and landline companies were required under federal law to implement new robocall-fighting technology by June 30. But this past fall, our research partners at U.S. PIRG Education Fund submitted a report to Congress highlighting the companies that had—and had not—fully adopted the technology. Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group (WISPIRG) and other organizations are now working to ensure that companies comply with the law.

Is that really the IRS calling? A robocall meant to trick you into disclosing personal information could put your financial security at risk—and government regulators need to do more to ensure phone companies are protecting their customers from these dangerous scams. Credit: Tero Vesalainen via Shutterstock.
Fund made an alarming discovery: Out of the 49 largest phone companies nationwide (those that can serve 1 million customers or more), only 16 had reported to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that they had completely implemented anti-robocall technology.

What does this mean? It means the industry isn’t doing nearly enough to fight the crime that for years has caused so much heartache and aggravation among consumers across the country. Illegal robocalls cost Americans $10 billion a year in fraud, according to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC)—plus an additional $3 billion a year in wasted time, according to the FCC.

Of course, not all robocalls are illegal or malicious. We sign up for some helpful robocalls:
- Our prescription is in at the pharmacy.
- Our kid’s school is closed.

Phone calls are generally illegal if:
- It’s a telemarketing call with a recorded message, unless the caller has written permission from you allowing the company to call you.
- It’s a call aimed at deceiving or defrauding you.
- It’s a call from a legitimate company that you haven’t done business with and it’s calling you even if you’ve registered your number on the federal Do Not Call Registry.

The news isn’t all bad: With the new federal regulations taking effect, scam calls dropped by 29% nationwide from June to August, according to YouMail, a leading robocall filtering company. But there’s still more to be done, especially as we’re seeing new threats such as robocalls.

What’s next

PIRG’s Consumer Watchdog team is continuing to look into what the FCC and phone companies are doing to rein in robocalls. And we’re sharing our findings to spur further action.

For instance, many carriers are not required to comply with the new law to reduce robocalls until June 2023. The FCC admits that robocalls are still on the rise for some smaller providers. But Americans need better protections from robocalls now, not two years from now—so we’re urging the FCC to require all companies to comply as soon as possible.

In the meantime, my team and I have put together 18 tips to help you reduce robocalls and protect you and your loved ones from scams. Find the guide online at: wispirg.org/robocalls.

ZERO OUT TOXICS

Victory: EPA bans pesticide linked to brain damage in children

After PIRG and supporters like you spoke out, a brain-damaging pesticide will no longer be allowed on our food.

On Aug. 18, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that it will ban the pesticide chlorpyrifos from use on food crops. Linked to brain damage in children, chlorpyrifos was banned for household use two decades ago—and now the EPA has finally moved to stop it from contaminating our food as well. WISPIRG, our national network and our coalition partners delivered more than 27,000 petition signatures calling on the EPA to ban chlorpyrifos.

“The EPA has known about the health risks associated with chlorpyrifos for years. Now, families can rest easier, knowing that their children won’t be exposed to this brain-damaging pesticide in their food,” said Danielle Melgar, Zero Out Toxics advocate for our national network.

PIRG’s Teresa Murray spoke with news outlets about new federal regulations protecting Americans from robocalls—and what consumers can do to protect themselves when those regulations fall short.

WISPIRG’s Mission

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, WISPIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. WISPIRG’s mission is to deliver persistent, results-oriented public interest activism that protects consumers, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.
“But chlorpyrifos will still be allowed on golf courses and turf, which means we need to do more to convince decision-makers to protect Americans from this toxic chemical.”

**RIGHT TO REPAIR**

**Apple, Microsoft agree to make devices easier to repair**

If you’re among those who don’t want to add your broken iPhone to the 416,000 mobile phones Americans throw away every day, we have good news.

Apple, once one of the most visible opponents to the Right to Repair movement, on Nov. 17 reversed its longstanding policy against making spare parts, repair instructions and repair software tools available to customers and independent repair shops. The commitment is part of a new Self Service Repair program, and it came just days after the company pledged to stop deactivating Face ID for iPhone screens repaired independently.

Apple’s announcement also followed a similar one made by Microsoft in October—marking a month of unprecedented progress for the Right to Repair movement in the corporate sphere.

“This win was made possible by years of work on the part of Right to Repair advocates—including 33,000 messages from PIRG supporters urging Apple to end its unfair repair policies,” said Nathan Proctor, senior director of PIRG’s Right to Repair campaign.

The commitment came on the same day as a key deadline in a PIRG-backed shareholder resolution that our partners filed with the company.

**TRANSFORM TRANSPORTATION**

**Did you know the infrastructure bill will deliver thousands of new electric buses?**

Soon, millions of America’s kids will be able to breathe a little easier, thanks to the new infrastructure bill.

The bipartisan federal infrastructure package, signed into law by President Biden on Nov. 15, includes funding for thousands of electric school buses and low- and zero-emission public transit buses. Diesel exhaust is a known carcinogen that causes health problems including lung cancer, asthma, bronchitis and pneumonia—and it’s putting the health of millions of American children at risk on their daily rides to school.

The infrastructure bill also includes the first-ever U.S. investment in electric vehicle (EV) charging stations, a move that will reduce our climate-warming emissions while protecting the health of kids and others. Matt Casale, director of PIRG’s environment campaigns, said: “EV charging stations are a crucial step toward a future powered by clean, electric transportation.”

PIRG mobilized thousands of our supporters to urge federal lawmakers to bring America’s infrastructure into the 21st century. Now we’re working to ensure the money is spent wisely to build transportation infrastructure that will support a cleaner, healthier future.
Rather than expand the I-94 East-West corridor in Milwaukee, which would lead to more traffic and more pollution, why not invest in more pressing transportation needs instead?

On Sept. 14, WISPIRG and our coalition partners released a report titled “Fix At Six,” unveiling the Transit/Rehab Alternative, which would better meet the needs of Wisconsinites. The Transit/Rehab Alternative would still repair the safety and operational concerns of the 3.5-mile corridor but, rather than expand it, it would also invest in transit alternatives, including a new bus line and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure.

“Now is the time to stop building costly highway boondoggles and start investing in fixing our existing roads and providing Wisconsinites with cleaner, healthier transportation choices,” said Matt Casale, director of PIRG’s environmental campaigns.

“Wisconsin continues to spend billions of dollars on highway expansion projects that don’t solve our transportation problems,” said Matt Casale, director of PIRG’s environmental campaigns.

STOP HIGHWAY BOONDOGGLES

Report reveals safer alternatives to I-94 highway expansion project

TOP STORY:
We’re working to protect you from illegal robocalls
PIRG’s consumer watchdogs are advocating for better protections against dangerous scam robocalls. Your support makes this work possible.

FEATURED STAFF

Faye Park: As president of the PIRG network, Faye oversees our national campaigns to protect consumers and enable Americans to lead healthier, safer, more secure lives. Faye began her public interest career as a student volunteer with MASSPIRG Students at Williams College, and then later worked with the Student PIRGs in California on campaigns to help students register to vote and to promote recycling.