

## The Disappearance of Utility Monopolies in Pennsylvania

Corporate monopolies can be a big problem for those who run small businesses and just for personal lives, too. If a company can control someone just by implementing common changing, or inventing new policies that consumers then have no choice but to put up with, consumers simply lose out. By contrast, competition encourages fair, balanced practices, something monopolies just won't do.

Utility monopolies are a major problem in many states today but in '96, Pennsylvania took a huge step to curb this imbalance. The state's electricity market became deregulated, bringing more competition and service oriented electric providers into all regions.

It was soon recognized elsewhere that electricity deregulation was a positive development for consumers, and so, the FCC, the Federal Communications Commission, issued orders to include the local telephone market in deregulation as well. Natural gas customers benefited from deregulation as of November 1, '99. Then, consumers began to have their free choice of utilities as well.

Each of the three utility categories in Pennsylvania gives consumers approximately 10 companies to choose from. All service providers have low rates as a priority, and this is the most important benefit they can offer to customers. Close behind is service, such that customers are assured that outages will be taken care of as quickly as possible. Good ratings and referrals increase companies' chances for more business.

Utility companies in competition may offer incentives to attract customers and provide updated knowledge in their industry. Perks of free gifts is also not unheard of but you have to understand that nothing is ever free. Read and understand any type of Agreement that you accept.

If you do ever feel that you've been scammed, or if you feel that you've been "crammed," which is the practice of adding additional charges to your account without your knowledge or consent, contact the Office of Consumer Advocate. The Pennsylvania General Assembly set up this organization in '76, to give consumers the ability to demand just and fair service from utility providers.

Today, the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission has as its main focus to balance between the needs of the consumers and utilities so that safe, reliable and affordable service is ensured. With the public at the forefront of consideration, they also want to further economic development by making sure the public is educated about sound choices when it comes to choosing a utility company to provide for their needs.

Monopolies can certainly be unjustified and predatory in their procedures and practices. When monopolies exist, consumers' complaints can often fall on deaf ears because there is no reason to listen. After all, most consumers in this situation have no recourse. Pennsylvania had the forethought to make changes when they saw the state was heading in that direction, and made the decision instead to give consumers a choice. What that means is that today, customers and utility companies, as well as the Public Utility Commission, work together to provide the best service at the most affordable cost possible.

### About the Author

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