



Division of Consumer Advocacy

CONSUMER SPOTLIGHT

Issue #6

Public Utility News You Can Use

May 2008

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Fax: (808) 586-2780
E-mail: dca@dcca.hawaii.gov
Web Address:
www.hawaii.gov/dcca/dca

Also Visit:

Public Utilities Commission (PUC)

465 South King St., Rm. 103
Honolulu, HI 96813
Phone: (808) 586-2020
Fax: (808) 586-2066
E-mail: puc@hawaii.gov
Web Address:
www.hawaii.gov/budget/puc

Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

445 12th St., SW
Washington, DC 20554
Toll-Free: 1-888-225-5322
E-mail: fccinfo@fcc.gov
Web Address:
www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumers.html

Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC)

888 First St., NE
Washington, DC 20426
Toll-Free: 1-866-208-3372
E-mail: customer@ferc.gov
Web Address: www.ferc.gov

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

BY CATHERINE AWAKUNI

Aloha, and mahalo for picking up the latest issue of *Consumer Spotlight*. As the "Consumer Advocate," our office is understandably presented with all types of consumer complaints and questions. The Division of Consumer Advocacy (DCA), however, deals with public utilities and motor carriers. For instance, if you have a dispute with a contractor or retail store, we are not the appropriate agency to handle your problem. Of course we do not want you, the consumer, to feel abandoned so we do our best to redirect your inquiries. Other specialized offices within the Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs should be able to resolve your particular problem. We know how frustrating it can be to call a number, get transferred to another office, and then another, and it just seems like a game of passing the buck. So in this issue the DCA would like to point out appropriate offices to call within the department for some of the more common inquiries. Phone numbers and web addresses are also included for your convenience.

Another issue that we'd like to address, that is actually regulated on a federal level by the Federal Communications Commission, is digital television (DTV). The switch-over on February 19, 2009 is quickly approaching, and many of you still have questions about it, with the all important one, "Will I need a new TV?" Although the DCA has no direct role in the process, we would like to at least attempt to inform the public about the digital switch to the best of our ability. As a reference we also included web links and phone numbers if you still have more questions about DTV.

HAWAII CLEAN ENERGY INITIATIVE

Officials from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) led a nearly week-long workshop in April to help direct the Hawaii Clean Energy Initiative.

The Division of Consumer Advocacy, along with members of the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, representatives from Hawaii utilities, and other energy-related organizations gathered to discuss a unified goal of having at least 70% of the State's energy demand supplied

by renewable resources by 2030. While the various parties may not yet agree on the path to that goal, everyone agrees that coming together is imperative in moving Hawaii off of its dependence on oil, and they plan to keep open discussions going. The Public Utilities Commission met separately with DOE officials for their



DOE officials lead a discussion forum on clean energy at the HECO Auditorium

own private workshop on the same topics to prevent inappropriate ex parte communication regarding ongoing energy-related dockets.

For more information about the Hawaii Clean Energy Initiative visit:

www.hawaii.gov/dbedt/info/energy/hcei/

DCCA Divisions:**Business Registration (BREG)**

Phone: (808) 586-2744

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/breg**Business Action Center (BAC)**

Phone: (808) 586-2545

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/bac**Cable Television Division (CATV)**

Phone: (808) 586-2620

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/catv**Office of Consumer Protection (OCP)**

Phone: (808) 587-3222

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/ocp**Division of Financial Institutions (DFI)**

Phone: (808) 586-2820

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/dfi**Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH)**

Phone: (808) 586-2828

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/oah**Insurance Division**

Phone: (808) 586-2790

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/ins**Professional and Vocational Licensing (PVL)**

Phone: (808) 586-3000

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/pvl**Real Estate Branch (REB)**

Phone: (808) 586-2643

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/real**Regulated Industries Complaint Office (RICO)**

Phone: (808) 587-3222

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/rico**Securities Branch:****Securities Compliance Branch
Securities Enforcement Branch
Investor Education Program
(SEC/SEB/IEP)**

Phone: (808) 586-2744

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/sec

DCA & DCCA

Filing a complaint can be difficult, especially if you are not sure who to contact. It can lead to confusion and frustration, as your call gets bounced from one person to the next. So included below are brief explanations of a few of the divisions within the Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs.

The Division of Consumer Advocacy (DCA) represents and protects consumer interests before the Public Utilities Commission (PUC). The DCA monitors the activities of public utilities, including electric, gas, telecommunications, private water and wastewater companies. Motor and water carriers also fall under the jurisdiction of the PUC. The DCA ensures that any rate increase requested by a utility company is just and reasonable. If you have a complaint against a public utility, you can file it with the PUC, or if you need further assistance feel free to contact the DCA. You can also download a complaint form from the DCA's website. The DCA's contact information is posted on the front page of this newsletter.

The Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) focuses on investigating and collecting consumer complaints accusing vendors or organizations of unfair or deceptive practices in areas including, but not limited to, refunds, motor vehicle rentals, door-to-door sales, and credit practices. OCP also deals with complaints against charitable organizations and merchants. OCP may initiate legal action on behalf of customers as a whole, but does not represent individual complainants as their private counsel. You may register a complaint about a company by calling the number listed in the left column or you can download and file the form on OCP's website. OCP also maintains a webpage on the Landlord-Tenant code where you can download the Landlord-Tenant Handbook or contact them with questions. Call the Residential Landlord-Tenant Hotline at 586-2634 from 8 a.m. - 12 noon, Monday - Friday, except on state holidays.

Did the contractor you hired do a shoddy job on your home? The Regulated Industries Complaints Office (RICO) makes sure the State's licensing laws are being followed by the over 40 boards and programs it regulates. RICO investigates and prosecute claims of misrepresentation, poor workmanship, unlicensed activity, and negligence. Visit RICO's website to get a list of the different boards and programs that RICO watches over. RICO does not prosecute claims concerning billing disputes, contractual disputes, or employer/employee relations. Before doing business with a licensed individual or a company, protect yourself by checking out their complaint history. Make sure they are licensed and that they are in good standing by using RICO's business search website or calling RICO's Consumer Resource Center. If you have grievances you wish to file against regulated industries or licensed professionals, you can contact RICO or download a form from the RICO website.

Troubles with your new car leaving a sour taste in your mouth? RICO is responsible for arbitrating the Lemon Law disputes with manufacturers. If you are having trouble getting your car fixed under the manufacturer's warranty, contact RICO to see if they can help you or go to their Lemon Law website:

www.hawaii.gov/dcca/areas/rico/scap_llaw/

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DCA & DCCA

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The Professional and Vocational Licensing Division (PVL) licenses 45 different professions and vocations. Unlike RICO, PVL deals with the actual licensing for these areas, not the enforcement of licensing laws. PVL handles applications, licenses, reviews, renewals, and license records. PVL helps to direct the proper implementation of licensing laws and regulations for the 45 licensing areas.

If you have problems with your cable television and have not had the issue resolved after contacting your cable company, you should contact the Cable Television Division (CATV). The CATV division grants cable franchises and regulates franchised wire-line cable operators in Hawaii (Oceanic Time Warner Cable and Hawaiian Telcom). CATV also keeps an eye on service quality and controls basic tier service rates. For a more detailed description of their services, as well as a complaint form, please visit CATV's website.

Adding to the confusion over who to contact for a particular problem are the areas mistakenly believed to be under DCCA jurisdiction when in fact they are within the jurisdiction of other Federal, State, or City and County agencies. Please visit this webpage: www.hawaii.gov/dcca/help, for contact information and who to direct inquiries to for areas such as airlines, education, identity theft/credit card, health, and law enforcement.

RECYCLING CFLs

Although the mercury content in a compact fluorescent lamp (CFL) is minimal, it remains to be a concern among many. Proper disposal or recycling of fluorescents is encouraged to further minimize pollution, but Hawaii has yet to establish an in-state recycling program for fluorescent lamps. In March, Hawaiian Electric Company gave away a thousand CFL recycling kits, which normally cost \$20, to the public. The kit is essentially a cardboard box with a zip-lock pouch, prepaid shipping label and instructions to send old CFLs to a mainland recycler.

While large handlers are required to properly dispose of fluorescent lamps under Hawaii Administrative Rules, household users are exempt from this rule. And with a cost of \$20 to mail back old bulbs, it would be hard to resist dumping it with the rest of the trash instead of recycling them.

Senate Bill 2842, which would phase out older lighting products among other things, would also direct the Department of Health (DOH) to develop a CFL recycling program for the state.

Although an in-state program would be ideal to maximize the participation rate of recycling CFLs, the Division of Consumer Advocacy has deferred comments on this bill to DOH because the reasonableness of the cost and implementation of such a program would be within their scope of expertise. In fact, DOH has testified before lawmakers that they are not properly funded or staffed to take on such a project at this time. The DOH still encourages everyone to recycle CFLs. A flyer on their website contains more information. You can view it at:

www.hawaii.gov/health/environmental/waste/p2wastemin/pdf/FluorescentLampP2web.pdf



Assembled and unassembled CFL recycling boxes from HECO's giveaway

H2O TOO

The DCA typically receives inquiries from the public regarding electric and telephone companies, but



please remember that you can also contact us about other utilities, including water and sewer service. Privately-run services, such as the Hawaii-American Water Company, are regulated by the PUC. If you do not think a filed rate increase request is justified, or are dissatisfied with service from a particular utility, your input is always welcome and encouraged.

The only exception is that County-run utility services, such as the Board of Water Supply, are not regulated by the PUC. Inquiries regarding County services should be directed to the respective County.

Electric Companies:

Hawaiian Electric Co. (HECO)

Phone: (808) 548-7311

www.heco.com

Hawaii Electric Light Co. (HELCO)

Hilo: (808) 969-6999

Kona: (808) 329-3584

Waimea: (808) 885-4605

www.heco.com/portal/site/helco/

Maui Electric Co. (MECO)

Phone: (808) 871-9777

Molokai & Lanai: 1-877-871-8461

www.mauielectric.com

Kauai Island Utility Cooperative (KIUC)

Phone: (808) 246-4300

www.kiuc.coop

THE 411 ON 411

In March, Metro One Telecommunications Inc., which provided directory assistance service for Hawaiian Telcom, announced the shut down of its wholesale directory assistance operations in May. Hawaiian Telcom began an immediate and thorough search for a new provider. The company says they would not lock into a contract with a company just because it was cheap if it compromised service quality to customers. Hawaiian Telcom has narrowed down its choice and hopes to have a new provider in May. In the meantime they have negotiated a deal to keep Metro One workers on staff through the end of June to ensure a smooth transition.



Wat da numba fo ...

Telecommunication Companies:

Hawaiian Telcom

Phone: (808) 643-3456

www.hawaiiantel.com

Time Warner Telcom

Phone: (808) 441-8500

www.twtelecom.com

Pacific LightNet Communications

Phone: (808) 791-1000

Toll-Free: 1-888-478-1414

www.plni.net

DTV = NEW TV?

The Digital Television (DTV) conversion is coming! You've probably seen commercials for it, read a scrolling message on the bottom of your screen, or heard from a friend worried that, "My TV goin be no good pretty soon." It's a little confusing, but actually you can still hold onto that old faithful, yet bulky, living room box if you are not quite ready to upgrade.

The U.S. Congress set February 17, 2009 as the last day for analog broadcasts on full-power television stations across the country. After this date, the TV stations must broadcast in digital only, providing better picture quality as well as freeing up analog space for emergency responders.

If you currently use "rabbit ears" or rooftop antennas for free over-the-air television reception this broadcast signal change affects you. Although you should still be able to use your existing TV, you will need to get a Digital-to-Analog converter box come the February switchover, otherwise you will be staring at a blank screen. Officials estimate that certified converter boxes will cost about \$40 to \$70. If you subscribe to cable or another pay service, such as satellite, or if your television has a built-in digital tuner, then a converter box is not necessary.

To help cut costs on the upgrade you can get a \$40 off coupon for a converter box by going to this website: www.dtv2009.gov or you can call: 1-888-388-2009.

Each household is entitled to two coupons for two converter boxes.

For more information on the DTV switch you may want to also visit www.dtv.gov or contact the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Contact information for the FCC is located on the front page of this newsletter.

For husbands looking to use the changeover as an excuse to buy that big sleek flat-screen television, sorry for refuting your argument. However, you could take the missus to the store and show her how much better "Desperate Housewives" will look in high-definition (HD). FYI, Oprah recently announced plans to go HD this fall. You may need to bribe her with some bling or romance, but "what better way to spend our economic stimulus check, honey?!" Remember you can still catch network programming in HD for free over the air so you do not necessarily have to opt for HD-packages from the cable company. Although once viewers get a taste of HD the craving for more channels has them springing the extra money.

For those indulging in purchasing a new television and looking to recycle their analog sets instead of buying the converter box, you can visit the myGreenElectronics program website at www.mygreenelectronics.org. You can find places near you to drop off your old televisions for recycling.

KAUAI DEADLINE DELAY

Garden Isle residents have a little extra time before switching to digital thanks to a loophole in the FCC mandate. The switch specifically mentions that full-power television stations need to convert, but Kauai receives low-power signals, thereby technically excluding it from the mandate. Officials are expected to correct the legislative oversight at some point so viewers on Kauai should still plan on upgrading in the near future to avoid tuning in to a blank screen the day Kauai finally does change from analog to digital transmission. For more information regarding digital TV in areas with low-power television service (LPTV) visit:

www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/DTVandLPTV.html.

