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.

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 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 robo-text messages not covered by the law and more targeted scam calls thanks to data breaches.

**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: masspirg.org/robocalls.

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.

**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. MASSPIRG, 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.

**MASSPIRG’s Mission**

When consumers are cheated or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, MASSPIRG 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. MASSPIRG’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.

GET THE LEAD OUT

**MASSPIRG testifies on behalf of lead leaching bill**

Lead is an incredibly potent neurotoxin that impacts how children learn, develop and behave. And yet, more than half of the 43,000 taps tested in 960 schools across our state since 2016 were positive for lead.

That’s why MASSPIRG Legislative Director Deirdre Cummings and other advocates testified in support of S.580/H.906—legislation that would get the lead out of drinking water at schools—and urged the Legislature to pass it. Everyone should have access to clean and safe drinking water, especially kids whose developing brains are more at risk for the neurotoxic effects of lead poisoning.

“Schools should be safe places for our kids to learn and play, but Massachusetts is not doing enough to protect our kids from lead in drinking water,” said Deirdre. “We need policies that get the lead out of faucets and fountains in our schools and preschools.”

The good news is that we know how to get lead out of drinking water. We just need the leadership and commitment to do so. Passing this bill will ensure that our kids, teachers and the school community will be protected from lead poisoning.

PIRG’s Nathan Proctor spoke with Bloomberg News about Microsoft’s new commitment to Right to Repair, what it means for the fight against toxic e-waste, and the thousands of citizen advocates who helped make it happen.
The landmark 1982 “Bottle Bill” is one of Massachusetts’ most effective recycling measures. But after 40 years, it’s in need of an update to more efficiently reduce waste in the 21st century.


“It is the right time. There is no reason not to do this,” said Sen. Creem. “By expanding the container deposit system to include all these containers, we bring the Bottle Bill into the 21st century.”

Fifty state lawmakers have already co-sponsored the bill, and more than 50 organizations have endorsed it.