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Consumer Alert: Customers of Internet-based telephone service must reply to 9-1-1 notice or face disconnection

Silver Spring, MD – August 22, 2005 – The nation's utility consumer advocates are warning many customers of Internet-based telephone service (known as Voice over Internet Protocol, or VoIP) that they must respond by August 29 to notices being sent out by their providers or face disconnection from their service the following day.

"It is crucial that consumers respond to the notice from their provider if they wish to keep their Internet-based telephone service," said John R. Perkins, President of the National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates (NASUCA) and consumer advocate for the state of Iowa.

"Beyond the need to take action to avoid being disconnected, consumers should use the notices as an opportunity to fully explore the differences between traditional home telephone service and calls made over broadband," said David Bergmann of the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel and chair of NASUCA's Telecommunications Committee.

Partly in response to recent tragedies, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has required providers whose VoIP service does not include enhanced 9-1-1 (E 9-1-1) capability, or whose E 9-1-1 has limitations, to send notices to all of their customers. E 9-1-1 technology automatically identifies the caller's address and telephone number to the emergency operator, potentially saving time and lives.

The notices are intended to alert consumers so they will not mistakenly think that their VoIP service will handle 9-1-1 calls in the same manner as a traditional telephone system. Companies have been sending the required notices by various means, including electronically and standard mail. If customers of Internet-based telephone service have not yet received a notice or need another copy, they should immediately contact their provider.

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The FCC has ordered VoIP providers to provide E 9-1-1 by later this year; the notice requirement is an interim step. NASUCA believes that the decision requiring E 9-1-1 is critical, but other issues – including the ability to have telephone service during a broadband or power outage – need to be considered by consumers and regulators.

About NASUCA

The National Association of State Utility Consumer Advocates (NASUCA) is an association of 42 advocate offices. Members are designated by laws of their respective states to represent the interests of utility consumers before state and federal regulators and in the courts.

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