

# Egan, others, take stand on phone 'cramming'

## New bill aims to ban unethical charges on phone bills

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By Pat Forgey

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Juneau Sen. Dennis Egan was the victim of what's known as "phone cramming," unauthorized charges placed on his phone bill by unrelated companies.

"I got nailed, and it was bizarre for me trying to get off this — they just keep billing you," he said.

Now, Egan, D-Juneau, has joined with several other Democratic senators to introduce legislation trying to keep that from happening to other Alaskans.

Joining Egan in sponsoring Senate Bill 138 are Sens. Bill Wielechowski, Bettye Davis and Johnny Ellis, all fellow Democrats from Anchorage.

The FCC estimates that 15 million to 20 million households may have unauthorized charges on their landline bills each year, with charges ranging from \$1.99 to as much as \$19.99 a month. The agency says most people have no clue the charges are there because they appear with vague wording such as "voicemail," "service charge" or "other fees." On mobile phone bills, the charges may appear as downloads for services that were never actually downloaded, or as subscription charges for what users thought was a single purchase, perhaps for a weather alert or ringtone, the senators said.

"Consumers often don't spot the small monthly fees, but even when they do getting refunds can be a nightmare," Wielechowski said. "The telephone provider that sends the bills often refuses to issue refunds, instead referring consumers to the third-party firms, which are often unresponsive."

That's the system Egan described as "bizarre," and is what made him eager to join the effort to stop unethical billing practices.

The process begins when consumers are solicited for free trials, coupons, prices and they're not told clearly that there will be a bill involved.

The Democrats' bill is modeled after legislation passed last year in Vermont.

Since the state of Alaska has regulatory authority over landlines and wireless service providers in rural Alaska that are carriers of last resort, the legislation would target cramming as it relates to those services, the senators said.

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