

Spring 2019

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## April is National Safe Digging Month

The RCA reminds Alaskans to play it safe by calling 811 before starting a digging project large or small.

Across southcentral Alaska, gardeners and landscapers will start getting busy sprucing up yards to prepare for a summer of fun. Before you pick up a shovel, you should pick up your phone and dial 8-1-1 two days before you dig to have the approximate location of your utility lines marked.

Striking an underground utility line while digging can harm the environment, cause serious personal injuries or even fatalities, disrupt service to an entire neighborhood, and potentially incur fines and repair costs. An excavation damage to a natural gas pipeline could cause up to \$200,000 of federal fines for each day of the violation with a maximum penalty of \$2 million in a related series of violations. Avoid a catastrophe like the [Deadly Gas Explosion in Wisconsin, July 2018](#).



## Frequently Asked Questions About Smart Meters

Most electric utilities in Alaska and across the United States have rolled out smart meters. According to the U.S. Energy Information, in 2017 utilities had about 78.9 million smart meter installations and 88 percent were residential customer installations.

**So, what are smart meters?** Smart meters are digital meters that measure a customer's electricity consumption and transmits the consumption data to the utility.

There are two types of smart meters: **Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI)** and **Automated Meter Reading (AMR)**.



AMI meters provide two-way communications to and from a customer's meter. AMR meters are capable of transmitting a customer's usage data from the meter, but are not capable of two-way communication.

Smart meters communicate data via wireless radio frequency (RF) transmissions or existing power lines. RF emission standards are established by the [Federal Communications Commission \(FCC\)](#).

**What are the benefits of smart meters?** There many advantages of smart meters for utilities and customers, including:

- allowing for faster outage detection and restoration of service;
- remotely connect or disconnect;
- improved customer information usage patterns and energy costs; and
- reductions in meter reading and transportation costs, as well as the need to access customer property.

**Are there health concerns with smart meters?** While some have raised questions about the safety of smart meters, RFs on smart meters are similar to other devices the consumers already use everyday (e.g., microwaves, cordless phones, cellphones, and Wi-Fi routers). In a recent formal complaint filed by a smart meter opponent, the RCA did not find good cause to investigate claims regarding negative health impacts of smart meters (see Order [U-18-105\(3\)](#)).

### Drip. Drip. Drip.

Are you ready to chase down leaks? Household leaks can waste nearly 1 trillion gallons of water annually nationwide, so each year we hunt down the drips during Fix-a-Leak Week.

Mark your calendars for the United States Environmental Protection Agency's annual Fix-a-Leak Week, March 18 through 24, 2019.

While you're at it, take a [pledge](#) to save water this year and every year!





## Former Anchorage Mayor Dan Sullivan Appointed as RCA Commissioner

Governor Michael J. Dunleavy has appointed Commissioner Dan Sullivan to the RCA for a six-year term beginning

March 1, 2019. Before his appointment to the RCA, Commissioner Sullivan served as Mayor of Anchorage from 2009-2015. He served on the Anchorage Assembly from 1999-2008, presiding as chair of the Assembly during the 2006-2007 term. Commissioner Sullivan also served as a board member of the Alaska Natural Gas Development Authority from 2003-2010.

Commissioner Sullivan was the Executive Director of the 1996 Arctic Winter Games held in Chugiak and Eagle River; and before that, his company, the Sullivan Group, provided government relations services to a variety of clients including Marathon Oil, Phillips Petroleum, and the National Federation of Independent Business.

Commissioner Sullivan has a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Oregon. He has been married for 33 years to his wife Lynnette, an award-winning teacher who recently retired from the Anchorage School District.

## Is Budget Billing the Right Choice for You?

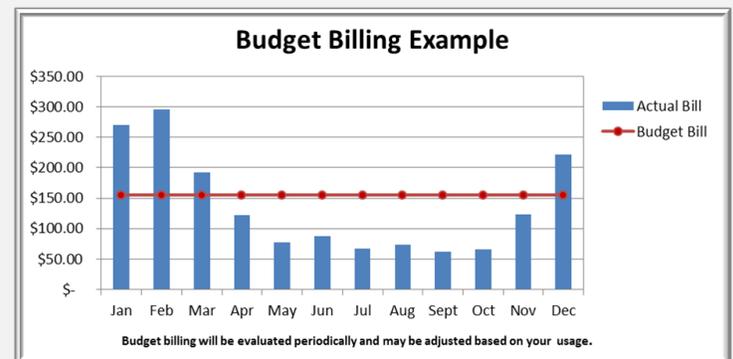
Throughout the year, your monthly energy bill fluctuates. Seasons change, heating costs rise in the winter, and energy use varies. This can make it difficult to anticipate your utility bill.

Budget Billing is a level pay program that allows you to have a fixed utility payment each month.

When you sign up for the program, your Budget Billing amount will be estimated based on your energy costs over the past 12 months. The number is then used to calculate 12 equal monthly payments.

At the end of the Budget Billing cycle, the utility company compares the amount of energy you've actually used with the amount you paid during the year. If you've paid more than your usage, you get a refund or credit on your bill. If you've paid less than the energy you've used, you are billed for the additional amount at the end of the year, and your budget billing amount may also increase for the following budget billing cycle.

In the example below, if your annual electric (or natural gas) usage costs \$1,343.44, your monthly Budget Billing amount would be about \$112.



While Budget Billing helps avoid high winter bills, reviewing your monthly household expenditures and carefully examining your energy usage can provide you more information if Budget Billing is the right choice for you.

For energy cost saving tips, visit [www.energy.gov](http://www.energy.gov) and download the "[Energy Saver Guide: Tips on Saving Money and Energy at Home.](#)"

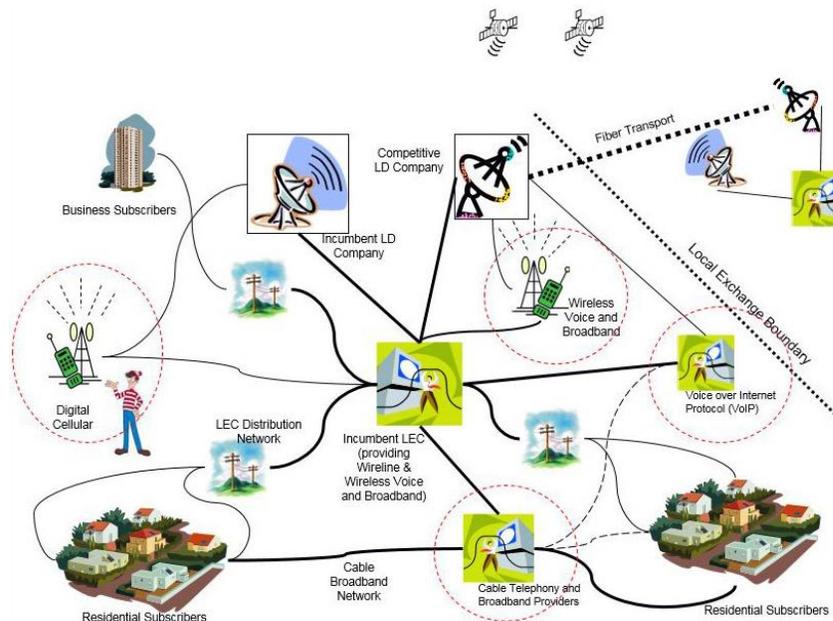
## TELEPHONE TALK: Having trouble calling people in rural areas?

When calling a rural area, long distance or wireless carriers may experience symptoms of poor quality or failure to complete problems.

Consumers across the United States continue to report problems placing or receiving long distance or wireless calls to and from rural areas on their landline telephones.

### What is the cause of these problems?

According to the FCC, the problem appears to be occurring in rural areas where long distance or wireless carriers normally pay higher-than-average charges to the local phone company to complete calls. To minimize these charges, some long distance and wireless carriers contract with third-party "least-cost routing" service providers to connect calls to their destination at the lowest cost possible. Although many of these contracts include strictly-defined performance parameters, it appears that all too frequently those performance parameters are not being met, or indeed, some calls are not even connecting at all.



### Reporting Problems

If you are experiencing these problems, contact your long distance or wireless telephone service provider and report the problem with the following information:

- The date and time the call(s) were made or attempted
- The calling and called telephone numbers
- The name of the long distance or wireless telephone service provider that serves the calling customer.

You may also contact the FCC at 1-888-CALL-FCC. If the issue relates to long distance calls within Alaska, you may contact a consumer protection officer with the RCA.

See [FCC's Rural Call Completion](#).

# RCA Aims to Help Alaskans Avoid Scams

March 3 - 9, 2019 is National Consumer Protection Week, and there is no better time to warn Alaskans about impostor scams, including those claiming to be a public utility employee demanding immediate utility payment.

The RCA Consumer Protection & Information Section convened its 2ND Annual Consumer Forum with an array of speakers from various agencies.



From left: Cynthia Franklin, Assistant Attorney General, Department of Law, Chuck Harwood, Northwest Regional Director, Federal Trade Commission, and Sharon Patrick, Marketplace Manager, Better Business Bureau

The Consumer Forum provided latest updates on how Alaskans can protect themselves from various scams and deceptive practices.

According to Mr. Chuck Harwood, Director of the Federal Trade Commission’s Northwest Regional Office, in 2018, people reported losing \$1.48 billion to fraud – an increase of 38% over 2017. Scammers like to get money by wire transfer –total of \$423 million last year.



The Consumer Forum also provided an opportunity to learn about services of other state agencies such as the Alaska State Human Rights Commission, Offices of the State Ombudsman and Long Term Care Ombudsman, Medicare Information Office, and Alaska Housing Finance Corporation.



Teresa Holt, Long Term Care Ombudsman, and Nila Morgan, Medicare Information Office

A PDF copy of the presentations can be downloaded from this link: [2019 Consumer Forum](#).