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Editorial: A citizen's quest for answers about Verizon charges pays off for all

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When a consultant saves a client money, that's being good at one's job. When the same consultant saves over \$1 million for people he doesn't know, that's being a good citizen. At the end of last month, the state Attorney General's office reached an agreement with Verizon New England Inc. that calls for the phone company to pay \$1.3 million back to governmental agencies to compensate for overbilling them.

Since the refunds are going to governments, it's the people who win — and they owe a debt of gratitude to Rob Chambers and Jim Levey of the Chambers Advisory Group in Northampton. It appears that the AG's office would not have known about the specious and unlawful charges if not for Chambers, a consultant who specializes in telecommunications.

While studying Verizon bills for clients, Chambers noticed the phone company was charging more than allowed under contracts with government entities. The overbilling ran from September 2006 to October 2012.

He rightly theorized that other Verizon customers — not just his clients — were being socked with charges above and beyond what they'd agreed to pay. And so he brought documentation of the overbilling to the AG's office and they together filed a claim in Hampshire Superior Court. That happened in 2012, but the court papers were impounded — and kept secret — until recently.

When asked by Gazette reporter Dan Crowley about the overbilling, Verizon said it has a track record of providing "reliable, cost-efficient services and promptly addressing issues that can arise under agreements as complex and wide-ranging as the state's blanket contracts." Anyone who's tried to read fine print on consumer contracts knows they can be complex. But they should be honored. Chambers says he identified a pattern of overbilling for services like local and regional toll calls and for flat-rate business accounts.

Chambers filed his court complaint under the False Claims Act, which allows private citizens to sue when they think governmental groups are victims of fraud. Chambers had seen problems before. This wasn't the first time he had confronted Verizon about its billing practices. Earlier, he was able to recover money for the Amherst schools and for the city of Easthampton.

While Verizon admitted errors in cases concerning Chambers' clients, he came to believe that the company had not done the right thing by issuing across-the-board refunds to customers who didn't yet know they'd been overcharged.

The 2012 court complaint alleged Verizon continued to bill the state and other governmental entities for fees these customers should not have been paying.

In other words, Chambers' research showed that even after Verizon learned that it was charging customers too much, it continued to send inflated bills.

On top of paying \$1.3 million back, the settlement requires that Verizon reach out to cities and towns about the overbilling.

The work goes on. The AG's office is getting in touch with cities, towns and other governmental entities covered by the Verizon contracts. The office is trying to make them whole. This \$1.3 million settlement is in, but on the question of whether Verizon had its customers' best interests in mind, the jury is still out.

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