Community Service Voice Mail

This Act authorizes a Community Service Voice Mailbox Program that enables qualified low-income people to get an individually assigned telephone number and the ability to record a personal greeting and a secure private security code to retrieve messages. The community service voice mail service may include toll-free lines in community action agencies through which recipients can access their community service voice mailboxes at no charge. The Community Service Voice Mail Program is funded by a telephone assistance excise tax on all switched access lines and by funds from any federal government or other programs for the purpose.

Submitted as:
Washington
Chapter 134, Laws of 2003
Status: Enacted into law in 2003.

Suggested State Legislation

(Title, enacting clause, etc.)

Section 1. [Short Title.] This Act may be cited as the "Community Service Voice Mail Program Act."

Section 2. [Definitions.] As used in this Act:
(1) "Community agency" means local community agencies that administer community service voice mail programs.
(2) "Community service voice mail" means a computerized voice mail system that provides low-income recipients with:
   (a) An individually assigned telephone number;
   (b) The ability to record a personal greeting; and
   (c) A private security code to retrieve messages.
(3) "Department" means the [department of social and health services].
(4) "Service year" means the period between [July 1st and June 30th].
(5) "Community action agency" means local community action agencies or local community service agencies designated by the [department of community, trade, and economic development] under [insert citation].

Section 3. [Universal Telephone Service.] The [legislature] finds that universal telephone service is an important policy goal of the state. The [legislature] further finds that:
(1) (a) Recent changes in the telecommunications industry, such as federal access charges, raise concerns about the ability of low-income people to continue to afford access to local exchange telephone service; and
   (b) Many low-income people making the transition to independence from receiving supportive services through community agencies do not qualify for economic assistance from the [department].
(2) Therefore, the [legislature] finds that:
   (a) It is in the public interest to take steps to mitigate the effects of these changes on low-income people; and
(b) Advances in telecommunications technologies, such as community service voice mail provide new and economically efficient ways to secure many of the benefits of universal service to low-income people who are not customers of local exchange telephone service.

Section 4. [Components of the Community Service Voice Mail Program.] The Community Service Voice Mail Program shall be available to participants of [department] programs set forth in [insert citation]. Assistance shall consist of the following components:

1. A discount on service connection fees of fifty percent or more as set forth in [insert citation].
2. A waiver of deposit requirements on local exchange service, as set forth in [insert citation].
3. A discounted flat rate service for local exchange service, which shall be subject to the following conditions:
   (a) The [commission] shall establish a single telephone assistance rate for all local exchange companies operating in this state. The telephone assistance rate shall include any federal end user access charges and any other charges necessary to obtain local exchange service.
   (b) The [commission] shall, in establishing the telephone assistance rate, consider all charges for local exchange service, including federal end user access charges, mileage charges, extended area service, and any other charges necessary to obtain local exchange service.
   (c) The telephone assistance rate shall only be available to eligible customers subscribing to the lowest available priced local exchange flat rate service, where the lowest priced local exchange flat rate service, including any federal end user access charges and any other charges necessary to obtain local exchange service, is greater than the telephone assistance rate. Low-income senior citizens sixty years of age and older and other low-income persons identified by the [department] as medically needy shall, where single-party service is available, be provided with single-party service as the lowest available local exchange flat rate service.
   (d) The cost of providing the service shall be paid, to the maximum extent possible, by a waiver of all or part of the federal end user access charge(s) and, to the extent necessary, from the [Telephone Assistance Fund] created by [insert citation].
4. A discount on a community service voice mailbox that provides recipients with
   (a) An individually assigned telephone number;
   (b) The ability to record a personal greeting; and
   (c) A secure private security code to retrieve messages.

Section 5. [Funding the Community Service Voice Mail Program.]

1. The Community Service Voice Mail Program shall be funded by a telephone assistance excise tax on all switched access lines and by funds from any federal government or other programs for this purpose. Switched access lines are defined in [insert citation]. The telephone assistance excise tax shall be applied equally to all residential and business access lines not to exceed fourteen cents per month. The telephone assistance excise tax shall be separately identified on each ratepayer's bill as the "Community Service Voice Mail Program." All money collected from the telephone assistance excise tax shall be transferred to a [Telephone Assistance Fund] administered by the [department].
2. Local exchange companies shall bill the Fund for their expenses incurred in offering the Community Service Voice Mail Program, including administrative and program expenses. The [department] shall disburse the money to the local exchange companies. The [department] is exempted from having to conclude a contract with local exchange companies in order to effect this reimbursement. The [department] shall recover its administrative costs from the [Fund].
[department] may specify by rule the range and extent of administrative and program expenses that will be reimbursed to local exchange companies.

(3) The [department] shall enter into an agreement with the [department of community, trade, and economic development] for an amount not to exceed eight percent of the prior fiscal year's total revenue for the administrative and program expenses of providing community service voice mail services. The Community Service Voice Mail Service Program may include toll-free lines in community action agencies through which recipients can access their community service voice mailboxes at no charge.

Section 6. [Rules.]

(1) The [commission] and the [department] may adopt any rules necessary to implement [insert citation].

(2) Rules necessary for the implementation of community service voice mail services shall be made by the [commission] and the [department] in consultation with the [department of community, trade, and economic development].

Section 7. [Reimbursement Limits.] The [state] Telephone Assistance Program shall limit reimbursement to

(1) One residential switched access line per eligible household, or

(2) One discounted community service voice mailbox per eligible person.

Section 8. [Waivers.] Local exchange companies shall waive deposits on local exchange service for eligible subscribers and provide a fifty percent discount on the company's customary charge for commencing telecommunications service for eligible subscribers. Part or all of the remaining fifty percent of service connection fees may be paid by funds from federal government or other programs for this purpose. The [commission] or other appropriate agency shall make timely application for any available federal funds. The remaining portion of the connection fee to be paid by the subscriber shall be expressly payable by installment fees spread over a period of months. A subscriber may, however, choose to pay the connection fee in a lump sum. Costs associated with the waiver and discount shall be accounted for separately and recovered from the telephone assistance fund.

Section 9. [Eligibility Requirements.]

(1) Adult recipients of [department]-administered programs for the financially needy which provide continuing financial or medical assistance, food stamps, or supportive services to persons in their own homes are eligible for participation in the Telephone Assistance Program. The [department] shall notify the participants of their eligibility.

(2) Participants in Community Service Voice Mail Programs are eligible for participation in services available under [insert citation] after completing use of community service voice mail services. Eligibility shall be for a period including the remainder of the current service year and the following service year. Community agencies shall notify the [department] of participants eligible under this subsection.

Section 10. [Reports.] The [department] shall report to the appropriate committees of the [legislature] by [December 1] of each year on the status of the state telephone assistance program. The report shall include the number of participants by qualifying social service programs receiving benefits from the telephone assistance program and the type of benefits participants receive. The report shall also include a description of the geographical distribution of
participants, the program's annual revenue and expenditures, and any recommendations for legislative action.

Section 11. [Severability.] [Insert severability clause.]

Section 12. [Repealer.] [Insert repealer clause.]

Section 13. [Effective Date.] [Insert effective date.]