



Free Voice Mail for Citizens in Need in Northwest Ohio

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) is working in partnership with Leader Technologies Inc. and the Ohio Benefit Bank to bring a critically-needed free voice mail service to individuals in northwest Ohio who are in transition and without traditional telephone service. Free voice mail service for those in need is available in 24 counties* in northwest Ohio.

The concept of voice mail for people in need is part of a nationwide effort initially made available in 2000 to Ohioans in Cuyahoga and Lorain counties through Community Voice Mail, a national nonprofit organization. Recently, Community Voice Mail expanded its Ohio efforts to include Summit County.

A New Service for People in Transition

During difficult times when many jobs are being lost and people are losing their homes, local community agencies are working overtime to provide needed services for their clients. Consumers may find themselves in difficult circumstances without a permanent place to live or a way to be contacted by family, potential employers, landlords, emergency shelters, or social service agencies.

Leader Voice Mail, a free service, is now available to individuals who do not have telephone service because they are without a permanent residence or because they simply can't afford it. Voice mail messages can be left by calling the individual's personal telephone number and messages can be retrieved by using any touch-tone phone or most computers with access to the Internet.

Filling a critical need

For individuals without access to telephone service, voice mail can assist consumers in searching for a job, maintaining current employment, finding a place to live; or staying in touch with family, medical professionals, or social service agencies. Not having a telephone number to put on employment and housing applications may be a tremendous obstacle to getting a job or obtaining housing.



Also, messages that are left with family members, friends, and others may not always be relayed.

Many social service agencies have been overwhelmed by the volume of individuals needing assistance during a difficult economy. Agencies' ability to reach

clients more easily and leave messages about potential employment or housing opportunities will make such efforts more efficient and increase their ability to serve larger numbers of people.

How the service works

Individuals who wish to sign up for the voice mail service can sign up with many participating agencies such as community action agencies, social service agencies, homeless shelters or domestic violence shelters. There is no cost and the initial sign-up process is quick and easy. Eligibility is determined by the participating agency on a case-by-case basis, according to a person's level of need.

Users of the voice mail service will receive a personal telephone number (in the 419 area code), which can be accessed from any touch-tone telephone (including a wireless telephone) or by using the Internet.

Leader Voice Mail allows individuals to create a personalized greeting, which will sound like any other voice mail greeting to the person who is calling. Each individual who signs up for the voice mail service will be provided with a wallet-sized card containing basic information needed to retrieve messages. The card will include the individual's userID, their personal phone number, the toll-free phone number to use to retrieve their messages and the Web site address for retrieving messages using the Internet.

Who is Leader Technologies?

Leader Technologies (www.leader.com) develops and markets Web-based collaboration platforms that merge voice and data, including email, voice mail, fax, teleconferencing, web conferencing, file sharing, documents, video, voting, chat instant messaging and other systems administration, operator and directory services.

Leader Technologies is donating its service to this project, including the voice mail technology itself, web-based sign up, and technical support.

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About the Ohio Benefit Bank

The Ohio Benefit Bank is implemented by the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks (www.obb.ohio.gov) and used by faith-based and community groups and public agencies at sites across Ohio in partnership with the Governor's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Benefit Bank sites allow low and moderate-income Ohioans to file electronically their federal and state income tax returns, while simultaneously finding out their eligibility and completing applications for tax credits and benefits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, food assistance, child care subsidies, home energy assistance and health care coverage.

The role of the OCC in the Leader Voice Mail Project

The OCC has been working with Leader to establish the voice mail service in northwest Ohio and hopes to expand the service throughout the state in areas where access to free voice mail has yet to become available. The OCC is also providing outreach to local social service agencies to educate them about Leader Voice Mail and how to sign clients up to use the service. For answers to questions about this free voice mail service, social service agencies and individuals can refer to the attached "Leader Voice Mail Frequently Asked Questions" or call the OCC. Agencies can also click on the link to the OCC during the sign up process for Leader Voice Mail for additional information about utility assistance available to low income individuals.

**- Counties offering Leader Voice Mail Service are: Allen, Ashland, Auglaize, Crawford, Defiance, Erie, Fulton, Hancock, Hardin, Henry, Huron, Lucas, Mercer, Morrow, Ottawa, Paulding, Putnam, Richland, Sandusky, Seneca, Van Wert, Williams, Wood, Wyandot*

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, represents the interests of 4.5 million households in proceedings before state and federal regulators and in the courts. The state agency also educates consumers about electric, natural gas, telephone and water issues and resolves complaints from individuals. To receive utility information, brochures, schedule a presentation or file a utility complaint, residential consumers may call 1-877-PICKOCC (1-877-742-5622) toll free in Ohio or visit the OCC website at www.pickocc.org.

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel is an equal opportunity employer and provider of services.

For additional information from the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel:

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