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Consumer's ripoffs eased by NUPIRG's volunteers

By Becky Brugman

What with new classes, long lines and the task of buying books, who would not have a complaint or two?

A new service offered by the Nebraska University Public Interest Research Group (NUPIRG) is willing to help ease the pains, if the complaints deal with consumer rip-offs or problems.

The 24-hour hotline will have an electronic secretary to record calls when no one is able to answer the phone. NUPIRG volunteers will take the calls during business hours.

The hotline, funded by Lincoln Action Program (LAP) is one of a kind in this area, so the market for this type of program is there, said Jan Skaggs, director of the information center.

The only other service similar to this is the consumer service at the attorney general's office. Since many people are too inhibited to call there, NUPIRG's service should help people out, she said.

Skaggs said she thinks the program will be successful, and that when the funding comes before review, it will be budgeted again.

Hopefully funded again

At present, she said LAP has the program funded for three months. At the end of this time, the program will be reviewed and she said, hopefully funded again.

She said they are now waiting to hear if a request for a full-time VISA volunteer will be sent to help with the program.

In October, the office will know if they will get a volunteer to man the office full-time. Right now, there are people in the office only from 1-5 p.m. weekdays.

Although the main concern is university students, Skaggs said that since the service is the only one of its kind in the area, other calls are welcome.

If one or two people complain about a business, the firm will be notified of the complaint. If a group of people complain

about a situation, a letter will be written, but a reply will be requested from the firm, Skaggs said.

She said that all calls received will be responded to, usually with a letter. No legal advice will be given, but they will be told where they can go for help. The attorney general's office is the usual referral, she said.

Many of the complaints deal with car estimates and automotive concerns. It is important to get everything decided upon in writing, she said.

Two-price complaint

Another common complaint is a product with two prices listed on the item. Although this is not illegal, it is unethical, she said. The firm usually gets a complaint letter in this instance, she said.

Skaggs said often complaints can be taken care of effectively by the consumer. A written letter, instead of a telephone call is usually received better by the firm, she said.

Skaggs said another service the center offers is information that will be given concerning products only in reference to consumer publication guidelines. She said the center cannot tell a consumer what product is best, they can only offer suggestions according to what publications such as "Consumer Report" suggests on that particular product.

Another way students can find out about a product is to come to the NUPIRG office in the Nebraska Union, Room 205. The office has files on products including many surveys on the products, she said.

Those wishing to conduct a survey on a particular product may now receive credit for doing so, she said. The student makes a contract with NUPIRG and must find a faculty advisor. The credit received depends on the project undertaken, Skaggs said.

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