

NYNEX Plan's Privacy Issues

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STAFF WRITER

An aggressive effort by NYNEX Corp. to give more low-income New Yorkers a discount on their phone bills is nearing its launch, raising questions about privacy trade-offs made in the Information Age.

Automatically enrolling New Yorkers for a "Life Line" discount promises to bring savings of about \$100 a year to thousands of people. But the new drive hinges on a transfer of computerized personal data from government agencies to NYNEX — without the consent of the people involved.

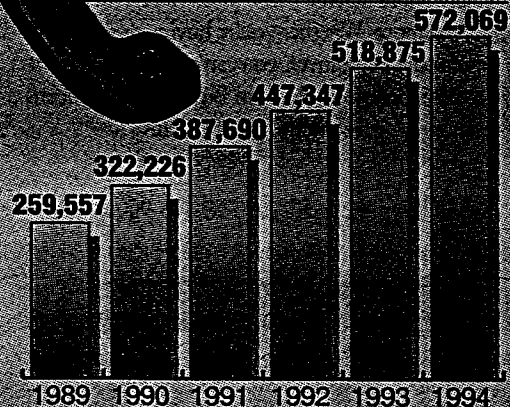
The discount cuts a bill by \$8.10 or \$9.10 a month, depending on the basic service used. An installation with a home visit would fall to \$10 from an average \$55.

Customers can get Life Line by showing they receive government aid such as Medicaid or Aid to Families with Dependent Children. More than 570,000 New Yorkers already have the discount, available

Please see **PRIVACY** on Page A42

By the Numbers

Statewide enrollment for Life Line discounts has climbed steadily since the program debuted in 1988, but officials say up to 1.7 million consumers may be eligible.



SOURCE: NYNEX

NYNEX Outreach Raises Privacy Issues

PRIVACY from Page A37

since 1988.

But that is perhaps just one-third of the 1.7 million customers who could have it, by NYNEX estimates — “not even a drop in a bucket,” said Elaine Marius, executive director of the Central Harlem Senior Citizens Coalition, who supports the drive.

In the city, 355,737 NYNEX customers now have Life Line — 11.5 percent of NYNEX' 3.1 million residential subscribers in the five boroughs.

NYNEX will start its enrollment effort March 15, eventually reaching more than 700,000 households statewide. Under the plan, government agencies are giving NYNEX data on people eligible for Life Line, including name, address and Social Security number. NYNEX is comparing that data with its own lists.

When the data match, NYNEX sends customers a letter saying the discount will be applied to their bills automatically unless they call a toll-free number within 30 days. When the data do not match exactly — if the public assistance and phone number are under different family members' names, for example — letters will tell them to return an enclosed card if they want the discount.

“It's easy to imagine that we'll have another quarter of a million households enrolled within the next six months,” said B. Robert Piller, executive director of Public Utility Law Project, a group that advocates for low-income utility consumers and pushed for the

new campaign. The program also has the blessing of government agencies delivering the data.

Still, Evan Hendricks, editor of Privacy Times, a newsletter based in Washington, D.C., said he was concerned that the data was being given to NYNEX without the prior consent of those directly affected. “You should have a right to decide how . . . information is used,” Hendricks said.

Mashon Baines, 25, a single mother in the Bronx, already has Life Line and supports efforts to increase enrollment. But she believes transfer of Social Security numbers could touch a nerve for others. “If you put in your Social Security number, a lot of information

can pop up,” Baines said.

Piller said he was aware that some recipients of government aid don't want their status to become public. However, he said, “We think there are very strong privacy protections.” Mark Condry, a NYNEX associate director, said, “Every step that we can possibly take is being taken.”

NYNEX said its agreement with the state requires that the data cannot be used for marketing to Life Line recipients. NYNEX employees will have access to the data only by using a restricted password or code, and the transferred data will not specify which type of government assistance an individual receives.