

STATE OF NEW YORK

# Public Service Commission

William M. Flynn, Chairman

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FOR RELEASE: IMMEDIATELY

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## **Phone Companies Agree to Provide \$170,000 to Fund Statewide Consumer Awareness Effort Regarding Free "Chatline" Blocking**

Albany, NY—1/12/05—The New York State Public Service Commission voted today to approve a \$170,000 monetary settlement involving four local telephone service companies in New York State that were not in compliance with the Commission's requirement to offer residential customers the ability to block access to chatline services free of charge. This money will fund a statewide, consumer education program to inform all New Yorkers of the option for free chatline blocking, regardless of which telephone company provides their local service. "Chatlines" are direct-dialed local numbers that allow any number of generally anonymous callers to engage in a live, interactive telephone conversation on a variety of topics.

"The Commission's chatline blocking requirements are designed to allow New Yorkers the ability to protect members of their family," said Commission Chairman William M. Flynn. "I believe that today's action sends a clear statement about our zero-tolerance for companies that do not comply with this Commission's blocking requirements and our intention to enforce these important consumer protections. The consumer education program that will be created should raise public awareness of the potential dangers to minors associated with telephone chatlines and inform parents that they may block, free of charge, access to chatlines from their residence."

Today's action stems from a September 2004 incident involving a minor who reportedly had been induced via a chatline to travel from her home to meet with an adult male in New York City. Upon learning that this chatline and all others on RNK's local network were on unblockable local central office codes, the Commission and RNK immediately took action to

bring the service into compliance. Within 24 hours, that particular chatline service was moved to an end user blockable line.

On the heels of quickly resolving the RNK situation, Chairman Flynn then took action with regard to all other local phone companies in the state. He directed the Secretary to the Commission to require all telecommunications companies that provide local service to chatline providers to report to the Commission promptly on the status of their compliance with the Commission's chatline blocking requirements. Of the more than several hundred companies offering local access lines to chatline services, three others, in addition to RNK, were not in compliance with the Commission's blocking requirements: Paetec Communications, Inc., Time Warner Telecom of New York, and Choice One Communications of New York. These companies and RNK each responded swiftly to the compliance issues and took appropriate action to either disconnect the chatlines or move the lines to blockable telephone numbers within the companies' local calling areas.

In lieu of pursuing penalty actions against the companies, Commission staff entered into settlement agreements in which these companies have agreed to make contributions totaling \$170,000 to fund an outreach and education program. The Commission's Office of Consumer Services (OCS) will work with the companies on the development of an outreach and education program that will include radio public service announcements and printed materials to be circulated to schools and community groups for distribution to parents.

The Commission will issue a written order reflecting today's vote. That order, when ready, can be obtained from the Commission's Web site at <http://www.dps.state.ny.us> by accessing the Commission Documents section of the homepage and referencing Case numbers 04-C-1276 and 04-C-1297. Many libraries offer free Internet access. Commission orders can also be obtained from its Files Office, 14<sup>th</sup> floor, 3 Empire State Plaza, Albany, NY 12223 (518-474-2500).

### **How Parents Can Block Access to Chatlines**

In New York State, telephone companies cannot operate chatlines on central office codes that also serve regular residential or business customers. Therefore, parents can block chatlines without fear of blocking access to friends, relatives, doctors, government agencies, regular business numbers and other normal telephone numbers. Customers can call their local telephone

company and request that telephone calls placed from their residences to specific information services numbers—including pay-per-call numbers and chatlines—beginning with certain local prefixes (the first three numbers of a telephone number) be blocked. There is no charge for the blocking service. However, customers should understand that all information services numbers beginning with that prefix will then be blocked from their telephones.

New Yorkers also may call the Commission's toll-free consumer information line at 1-888-ASK-PSC1 (1-888-275-7721) from anywhere within the state and press voice prompt number five (#5 – "telephone service") to get information about telecommunications matters, including call blocking information.