



04/04/2007

Bill to require solicitor ID

By: J.D. Prose, Times Staff

CRANBERRY TWP. - U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire has introduced legislation in the House that would require foreign-based call-center employees for American companies to tell consumers where they're located.

"Consumers have every right to know ... where their call has been redirected," Altmire said Wednesday at a press conference in the Cranberry Township municipal building.

Flanked by members of the Communications Workers of America, Altmire, D-4, McCandless Township, said his Call Center Consumer's Right to Know Act would raise awareness among the American public about the outsourcing of call-center jobs overseas, much as clothing labels inform people where those products are made.

Altmire said the legislation also would give consumers the opportunity to decline to give call-center workers personal information, such as Social Security numbers, if they aren't comfortable with sharing those details with someone in another country.

Several countries with growing call-center industries don't have privacy laws such as in the United States, Altmire said, and that could lead to identity theft.

Zachary Rice, director of government affairs for the American Teleservices Association in Indianapolis, agreed that consumers should be told where a caller is when they ask, but requiring disclosures up front would be "overly burdensome" to call-center workers, who already must disclose certain information within seconds.

Citing the Pittsburgh Regional Alliance, Altmire said there are about 20,000 people in southwestern Pennsylvania employed in call centers.

Peter Ryan, a Montreal-based senior analyst on outsourcing for Datamonitor, a global business information and strategy company, said most American call-center jobs outsourced overseas have gone to India and the Philippines.

But he also projects that call-center jobs in America will increase from 3.1 million in 2006 to 3.3 million by 2010. "You are seeing the American market grow," Ryan said.

Although some companies, such as AT&T, have brought call-center jobs back to America, Ryan said those decisions are fueled by consumer pressure, not laws. (Rice said Datamonitor has done work for the American Teleservices Association.)

As for Altmire's legislation, Ryan said comparable efforts have been undertaken before. "I really don't think they've had much effect other than making certain politicians look like they're sticking up for the United States," he said.

But Altmire said his legislation should be approved by the House in late July, and a similar measure should soon be introduced by U.S. Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., in the Senate.

"There's bipartisan support," Altmire said.

J.D. Prose can be reached online at jdprose@timesonline.com.

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