NCLC Attorney Margot Saunders to Testify at U.S. Senate Hearing on Stopping Abusive Robocalls on April 18; Will Urge FCC to Strengthen Key Federal Privacy Law


7.1 million consumer complaints filed with the FTC in 2017, up from 5.3 million the previous year

(Washington, D.C.) On Wednesday, April 18 at 10:00 am ET, the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation will convene a hearing on Abusive Robocalls and How We Can Stop Them. “Robocalls have increased 285 percent in less than three years, with over three billion robocalls made just in February 2018,” said National Consumer Law Center Senior Counsel Margot Saunders, who will testify at the hearing. “The surge in consumer complaints reinforces the need for the Federal Communications Commission to strengthen the federal Telephone Consumer Protection Act to cover autodialed calls and to give consumers relief from this escalating problem.”

In her testimony, Saunders will discuss the scope of the skyrocketing problem of abusive and unwanted robocalls since the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA) was enacted in 1991 and overseen by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC). About 24 percent of such calls are outright scams, and most of the remainder come from telemarketers (16 percent) and debt collectors (32 percent) for banks, credit card companies, and retail companies, according to February 2018 figures from YouMail.com.

“The TCPA is the principal federal law to provide protections against harassing and unrelenting debt collection calls from first party creditors,” said Saunders. “The debt collection industry is a key driver of abusive calls that break the law with documented cases resulting in hundreds or even thousands of calls to a person even after repeated requests to stop.”

Saunders’ testimony will stress the critical importance of consumer enforcement of the TCPA’s restrictions. Without consumer enforcement, robocallers that flood consumers’ phones with unwanted calls would have little to fear. Yet, although more than 7 million consumers registered complaints in 2017, only 4,392 lawsuits to enforce the TCPA were filed that year.

The FCC, under Chairman Ajit Pai, has taken some important steps to address unwanted robocalls, but much more needs to be done. The consumer groups called on the FCC to:

- Ensure that the TCPA covers all calls and texts to cell phones made with automated equipment. If the FCC definition of an automatic telephone dialing system is not sufficiently broad, consumers will have no protection against a host of types of unwanted calls and text messages.
- Specify several simple methods for consumers to revoke their consent to receive calls and text messages, and encourage robocallers to use them.
- Regulate caller ID spoofing more rigorously.
- Create a database of reassigned cell phone numbers so that callers can make sure that they do
not barrage a consumer with calls and texts intended for a different person.

- Require telecommunication providers to offer a free robust call blocking system to consumers.
- Implement congressionally required rules limiting calls made to collect debt owed to the federal government by limiting the number of calls that can be made.

Saunders will testify on behalf of the National Consumer Law Center (on behalf of its low-income clients), Americans for Financial Reform, Consumer Federation of America, National Association of Consumer Advocates, Public Citizen, and U.S. PIRG.