

April 18, 2003

The Honorable Ronald Forster  
Georgia General Assembly  
House of Representatives  
Atlanta, GA 30334

*Via Email:* rforster@legis.state.ga.us

Re: **URGENT: House Bill 867 - OPPOSE**

Dear Representative Forster,

We are writing to express our opposition to House Bill 867. The legislation is cast as a communications service theft bill; however, its reach is far greater. The proposed bill limits citizens' rights, limits legal uses of commonplace consumer electronics (such as VCRs and computers) and stifles technological innovation and research.

The undersigned organizations represent citizens' and consumers' rights to use the technology and media they lawfully own. In this capacity, we are particularly concerned with the spread of overly broad technology laws that stymie the growth of new technologies and prevent the reasonable and legal activities of consumers.

Proponents of the bill assert that the proposed language *updates* the terms of the current laws to better prevent the theft of communications services and Internet piracy. Existing state and federal laws, however, already address these concerns. The proposed bill, in contrast, *broadens* statutory definitions, reaching into the home to control what kinds of devices consumers may use in conjunction with services for which they have legitimately paid. Consumers have never needed the "express authorization" of their cable or phone company before buying a new TV, VCR or PC – there is no reason to change that rule today.

Current state and federal laws already impose high fines and minimum jail terms for communications signal theft and copyright infringement. Specifically, Georgia Code sections 46-5-2, 46-5-3 and 16-9-93 adequately address communications signal theft. Supporters of House Bill 867 have provided no evidence showing any inadequacies in existing laws and they have failed to explain why such broad language is necessary. The Georgia legislature should be wary of passing this bill without fully contemplating its true purpose and impact on citizens and technology.

The potential impact of this legislation is significant. The terms of this bill are so broadly and ambiguously defined that legal activities and technologies are threatened. For example, without express permission from the "service provider," everyday lawful activities could be outlawed or prohibited, such as:

- viewing paid-for television on multiple home TVs
- recording television on a VCR to view at a later time
- sharing a broadband connection among multiple home computers
- working from home by securely connecting to the office over the Internet

The ramifications also extend beyond citizens to manufactures, distributors and retailers because the use, distribution and sale of many consumer electronic devices and computer hardware and software could become illegal.

In addition, the bill implicates privacy and anonymous speech. For example, under House Bill 867, making anonymous communications to voice political views or report corporate misdeeds is a criminal offense. This bill would also make many encrypted business transactions illegal.

Lastly, to the extent that amendments make certain uses of communications services criminal only if there is an “intent to cheat and defraud” on the part of the consumer or manufacturer, that change does not resolve the problems discussed above. Regardless of the change in the burden of proof, the bill would still enable service providers to harass law-abiding consumers, many of whom will not be able to afford a lawyer to combat these charges. Moreover, this change still does not address the overarching question raised in this letter: why is this law necessary?

The undersigned groups support efforts to prevent the theft of communications services, but House Bill 867 is a thinly veiled attempt to criminalize activities well outside the scope of signal theft. Please protect the rights of citizens and support the creation of new technologies. We strongly urge you to oppose House Bill 867.

Sincerely,