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4,514 PHONES, BUT NOBODY'S HOME

EVERYONE likes to feel important, even indispensable.

Some pretend they are important by talking on cell phones in crowds, in theaters, in traffic. But thousands of state workers apparently got the same ego boost just by carrying government phones around without actually using them.

A report released this summer reveals that the commonwealth has been routinely billed for phones that have logged exactly zero minutes. An audit for the second half of 2009 showed an average of 4,514 such phones each month. That dead air cost taxpayers \$962,500 over six months.

That's some expensive silence, especially when those unused phones account for about a third of the 11,000 wireless devices and \$6 million in telecommunication expenses reported by state agencies annually.

For agency heads, public safety officials and workers whose jobs require extensive travel, cell phones are a necessary tool. Some of the agencies with the most zero-minute phones fall into those categories. The State Police tops the list with 639, followed by the Department of Corrections with 443. But it's harder to justify 407 zero-minute phones at the Department of Health, 126 for Virginia Commonwealth University or 117 at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The Virginia Information Technologies Agency, which oversees cell phone contracts for the state, disputes the findings. The agency says most of the zero-minute telecommunication devices are air cards for computer laptops and Blackberries used solely for e-mails. But auditors say

they did not include air cards in their review, and they say Blackberries represent only a handful of the zero-minute phones. It's possible that state cuts and a new administration have weeded out many of the unused phones. That's good. But the confusion over how many are still out there underscores the point auditors made in their report.

Walter Kucharski, the auditor of public accounts, contends that the state needs clear policies for assigning, safeguarding and monitoring cell phone use. Even when auditors considered total cell phones, including ones that are used regularly, it was clear that no such rules exist.

Why does the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation need 56 cell phones when the Attorney General's office has only 53? Tidewater Community College is about two-thirds the size of Northern Virginia Community College, but NVCC has 277 phones, more than three times as many as TCC. Old Dominion University is triple the size of Norfolk State University, but can it justify 223 cell phones when NSU has nine?

Sam Nixon, the state's new chief information officer, has already begun working on guidelines. He's also considering updates to a 30-year-old billing system for communications equipment that predates cell phone technology and doesn't help agencies figure out the most cost-efficient plans from the 69 voice and data options available.

The amount of money at issue is small compared to the state's \$15 billion annual operating budget, but taxpayers have the right to ask that our money be spent wisely, particularly during a recession. Can you hear us now? Good.