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September 19, 2017

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Long after their power has been restored after Hurricane Irma, many South Florida internet and television subscribers are still hot — but not because they don't have air conditioning. Thousands of customers of the region's two major Internet and television providers remained without services on Monday and are receiving no specific information about when they will be restored.

According to the Federal Communications Commission's latest post-Hurricane Irma status update released Monday, at least 893,409 Florida communications services subscribers had not yet been restored. That was down from 1.1 million on Sunday. The report does not break down outages by provider.

Comcast said Monday it has restored services to 80 percent of its customers in the tricounty region, including 78,000 over the past 24 hours. But based on emails and phone calls to the Sun Sentinel, as well as social media posts, customers of AT&T's U-verse services are frustrated as they continue to experience outages but can't get answers as to why the outages persist and what the company is doing to make repairs.

Debra Boudreau of Fort Lauderdale said an AT&T technician who came to her home Sunday told her the company has a widespread problem with circuit boards installed in distribution boxes at the ends of residential streets that serve about 200 households each. A large number of the boards failed across the region affected by Irma and AT&T doesn't have enough replacements or qualified technicians to install them, Boudreau said the technician told her. Messages posted in the customer forum section of AT&T's website included various versions of that explanation.

In a post addressed to "Florida U-verse customers," one customer said the outage was not caused solely by the hurricane. "This is a software/hardware problem," the user said. "When the ... neighborhood boxes went down for lack of power, they did not come back up correctly." In a statement to the Sun Sentinel on Monday, AT&T did not respond to questions about the equipment failures cited in the customers' comments, how many South Florida customers remained without services, when those services are expected to be restored, or how the company planned to compensate customers.

Spokeswoman Kelly Starling said, "It is not equipment or staffing that is our greatest challenge. It is the ongoing lack of commercial power." When told some of the customers with outages have electricity in their homes, Starling added, "Just because your power is on does not mean the U-verse box at the end of the street is still on." Starling also said, "We have made significant progress in restoring wireline services for customers in Florida, with more than 80 percent of affected network equipment back in service. Our technicians are working to restore service to the remaining customers as quickly and safely as conditions allow. Restoration efforts with power companies in Florida are ongoing; we are working to deploy additional power equipment to maintain and restore wireline service."

The statement added that AT&T has more than 735 wireline facilities on battery and more than 480 on generator for power. Wireline is an industry term meant to distinguish communications services distributed across wires from wireless services, such as those distributed from cell towers. Assurances

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that the company is working as hard as it can don't comfort subscribers without services or businesses that can't communicate with clients or process credit cards.

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Like Debra Boudreau in Fort Lauderdale, Becky Berger said she was told by a technician dispatched to her West Delray Beach home on Sunday that he couldn't immediately do anything. "He said it was a widespread outage and it would take another 48 hours. But 48 hours is what we've been hearing all along," she said. Berger said her power was restored to her home on Monday. Her outage began last Thursday — four days after Hurricane Irma left the region. Berger said her son works at a Delray Beach Auto Zone that can't accept credit cards because they can't process them without Internet service. Restaurants around her neighborhood require customers to pay by cash only, she said.

Meanwhile, a Comcast spokeswoman called the post-Irma restoration period "an extraordinarily challenging time for Florida" and said the company would continue to work "day and night" until all services are restored across Florida. "Immediately following the storm, we began accessing our network and deploying recover resources to affected areas," spokeswoman Mindy Kramer said in an email. "What we found was widespread damage and debris, our cable lines wrapped around power lines, thousands of damaged and downed poles, and in many cases poles that were simply destroyed and no longer usable."

So far, Comcast's restoration has involved installing more than 300,000 feet of new cable and repairing 14,000 damaged connections between utility poles and homes, Kramer said. Comcast was also impacted by having "virtually no commercial power to our network following the storm," Kramer said. "As a result, our teams deployed more than a 100 generators to power our equipment and brought in fuel around the clock to keep parts of our network running while we waited for commercial power to be restored."

Some continued outages are a result of residential areas that remain without power, while others might stem from Comcast's facilities being damaged or without power, Kramer said. Comcast plans to replace at no cost any equipment damaged by the hurricane, Kramer said. It won't charge for in-home appointments with technicians during the recovery period. Customers in Comcast's

hardest hit areas may suspend their services entirely or choose from reduced-rate options that will provide some level of service, such as email or video streaming services, through Comcast's apps.

In Miami-Dade County, Atlantic Broadband said 92 percent — or 72,000 — of its Miami-Dade customers had their services restored. Fewer than 5,000 remain out, largely because they lack power, president and CEO Rich Shea said. Atlantic Broadband does not serve Broward or Palm Beach counties. — **Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel**

Some rural Montana residents are learning they'll soon be without cell phone service after Verizon Wireless quietly informed them they're dropping them. At issues are accounts that use too much data outside the network. Notification letters were sent to 919 customers, accounting for 2,035 lines, Verizon spokeswoman Meagan Dorsch said. They'll be dropped Oct. 17, so there's time to port wireless numbers to other companies before their Verizon service ends.

"This only affects a few people who primarily roam on other networks and does not affect customers who primarily use Verizon's own network," she explained. "We regularly review accounts with data use that

primarily takes place outside of the Verizon network." Customers said they didn't know Verizon had been using other providers' towers and, now are faced with limited options. A primary concern is how this will impact emergency services. In rural Montana, neighbors are one another's first responders come fire, flood or heart attack.

"Probably 90% of our paging goes through Verizon texts. We use texts in tactical situations where radios will not work also," said Steve Leitner, service director of the ambulance service in Blaine County, Mont., on the Canadian border. But cell phones are sometimes exactly how a first responder even knows to show up. JJ French, a volunteer firefighter in Plentywood who has Verizon, said sometimes, the pager for he uses fire calls doesn't connect with the nearest tower but his phone does -- or vice versa. Before switching to Verizon Wireless, he had spotty coverage with a local provider, but now he'll likely have no choice.

Some of Montana's biggest politicians are ticked off, too. U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., sent a letter to Verizon CEO Lowell McAdam, highlighting the critical role cell phones play in his state. "I am very troubled by Verizon's recent decision," Tester wrote. "Given the importance of wireless communications for maintaining public safety, running a business and staying connected during emergencies, I strongly urge Verizon to reverse its decision."

U.S. Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., called it "unacceptable" and "yet another example of the rural-urban divide and choosing a bottom line over a commitment to Montanans." Montana Public Service Commissioner Travis Kavulla pointed out in a tweet that there's little wireless competition in the affected area.

Kim Barlogio, who lives in the remote southeastern corner of Montana, received a cancellation notice from Verizon after 17 years as a customer. Verizon had previously offered her an unlimited data plan. She contacted Verizon and was told the company no longer had a contract with Mid-Rivers Communications, a local company, and would not offer service in her area. And Mid-Rivers isn't taking on new customers. "As a community, we have nowhere else to go. We depend on our phone for emergencies," she said. "Out here, we are our own fire department, police department and emergency services. Not only do we help each other out, we are continually helping stranded travelers that do not have Verizon, as no other providers work out here."

Mid-Rivers mailed letters to dropped customers to say the company would put people on an "interest list" and recommended using WiFi, not data, at home. The scary moments could come when the weather gets bad in rural Montana and people with Verizon for only another month are, for example, out calving or feeding in winter's extreme temperatures in the far-out corners of the ranches. "In our remote area, every minute counts in an emergency. Hospitals are a long distance from our homes. I understand that Verizon is a business and they are not making money, having our rural number in service. At some point, ethics have to come into play," Kaila Williams of Hammond, Mont., said.

Cell phones have saved her family, she explained, citing a vehicle breakdown on a lonely country road and someone getting bucked off a horse working cattle. "Most of the people in the area affected are farmers and ranchers. There are obvious inherent risks involved with these professions and lifestyles," she said. "Personally, as a mother of three, I don't feel safe leaving the house without a way to contact help if the need arises."

For Heather Brownfield of Hammond, Mont., the reality hit home a couple of weeks ago. She runs a rural mail route with her husband, who called her to say a ranch fire was blazing. Brownfield called rural fire departments and posted on Facebook a plea for help from neighbors before joining the fire line herself. She continued to use the phone to coordinate with others. She called the cell phone her "first defense in an emergency." The fire would ultimately reached 500 acres. "Had we not had the cell phones, it's unimaginable how much worse this whole thing could have been," she said. — **Great Falls (MT) Tribune**



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