

Dear House Energy & Digital Infrastructure Committee,

I appreciate the effort to assure telephone connectivity during power outages. As you may be aware, this is an issue that has had extensive public process and testimony, primarily in the Senate Finance Committee over the last few years, and also in an FCC docket where the issue was how long batteries had to last. Industry wanted a few hours, consumer advocates in several states argued for more.

Those of us who live in VTel's service territory have had fiber optic cable since 2014. We learned that we are responsible for the batteries that provide phone service during power outages. I read a news story today indicating that copper land lines do not require electricity. My understanding is that is not accurate. When the technician was here installing the fiber optic cable I inquired about the batteries and he said that previously, the battery back-up was housed in buildings around the region. Apparently battery back-up was necessary with copper land lines, and what happened with the transition to fiber optic cable was to shift the requirement to maintain the batteries from the companies to consumers.

Rural towns like Middletown Springs and Shrewsbury experienced some 5-day power outages that led to real problems with the new fiber optic phone system. My impression is that Tinmouth developed a local emergency network to check up on people who might be in need, doing outreach. We were told the batteries would last 6 to 8 hours, but real world experience shows they do not last that long. They also have variable life spans depending on where they are housed. In a cold wet basement they do not last as long as in a warm dry portion of a building.

My own experience is that the battery lasted about 8 years. Since I am off grid and rarely lose power, I have only one experience where my power went out at 2 am (a rodent died in a conduit and the result shorted out the wiring) and by 8 am I had no phone service, so I drove a couple miles and made phone calls.

When I needed to buy a replacement battery, VTel's website offered two suggestions, so I called them both. One was a hardware store in Springfield and they didn't have any in stock. The other was Grainger in Rutland and I think they had two in stock. I bought one, it cost about \$25. They sell some that last longer than the advertised 8 hours, and also people can buy more than one and use them in series if the power is out for longer periods of time.

Here is VTel's current information page about batteries  
<https://www.vermontel.com/powersupply-batteryinfo/>

Trying to do anything via increased regulation did not seem to get anywhere, either at the FCC or through the discussions held in the legislature in recent

years. Undergrounding power lines, resiliency so there are fewer power outages, those seem to be the best ways to assure connectivity during storms.

As for phone quality, the fiber optic cable phone quality is very good, and far superior to cell phone calls which are generally poor quality, are subject to disconnection (we had a period of time recently where all received cell phone calls dropped at 15 minutes, apparently due to a software issue with some cell providers) and tend to be annoying, while phone calls using the VTel fiber optic system provide excellent service. The most important thing is to assure that all Vermonters have the opportunity to have landlines and not rely on wireless technologies.

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