http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/elderly-crowd-s5.jpg

Phone companies are changing and copper phone lines are expensive to maintain. Modern technology is making copper lines obsolete. But Sen. Kathleen Vinehout wonders if state law should allow phone companies to dump their landline customers in the name of profit.

CHIPPEWA FALLS, WI - “I was furious,” said Cindy from Chippewa Falls. “I wouldn’t have stayed on the phone this long with this dinky cell phone.” She just found out state law allowed phone companies to dump their landline customers.

Cindy waited 40 minutes on her “dinky cell phone” to join a telephone town hall meeting with 7,373 other seniors.

AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) hosted the town hall. I was the guest senator. We joined forces to promote my “Home Phone” bill – Senate Bill 240. The bill would return state law to pre-2011 language and protect phone customers from losing landlines.

Phone companies are changing. Modern technology may make copper phone lines obsolete. Copper lines are expensive to maintain. That is the industry’s side of the story. The last point – copper lines are expensive to maintain – is what led to Marge’s problem.

Marge lives in Maiden Rock surrounded by the hilly, rocky, rural bluffs. The phone line is aging and quality is poor. But cell phones don’t work unless Marge gets in the car and drives to the top of the bluff. When I met Marge last summer, she had been without her landline phone service for several weeks. At that time, the phone company refused to repair the line. We weren’t certain they would ever do the necessary repair.

Landline home phones are vital to the protection, security and social support of not only seniors

but many of the residents in rural areas. Prior to 2011 Act 22, Wisconsin residents were assured of landline telephone service through “provider of last resort” obligations. This law required telephone companies to make basic voice service available to all residential customers within the area in which they operated.

Four years ago, when I fought to stop 2011 Act 22, I was told not to worry because a federal law would protect landline phones. Now, one of Wisconsin’s largest telecommunication providers petitioned the federal government to remove the federal regulation, putting Wisconsin citizens at risk.

The Wall Street Journal reported in 2014 telephone giants “are racing to replace their phone networks with new technology.” Further, the WSJ reported the “FCC decided to allow carriers to launch ‘experiments’ aimed at weaning people off old, circuit-switched phone networks…two carriers, with a total of more than 250 million customers, aren’t shy about their ultimate goal: turning off their old networks forever”.

In our town hall meeting, we heard from seniors who lived through harrowing experiences saved by their landline phone.

James from rural Hayward told us his neighbor would not be alive without the connection of her landline phone to “Life Alert”. Marilyn fell outside in the winter and broke her hip. She pushed the emergency button connected to her landline phone, which alerted emergency responders.

“I used to work for AT&T,” James told town hall participants. When he worked for the company, they were proud to guarantee phone service. “What’s happened?” he asked.

Doris from Cornell said a landline phone is a lifeline for her husband who has a heart condition. The machine that helps his heart beat is monitored through a signal that can only be transmitted over a landline phone. The signal goes to Pennsylvania and then back to a hospital in Eau Claire.

Another concerned participant explained that her 84-year-old Aunt wears a bracelet that

connects her to emergency services. The cell phone company will not support the service needed to make her bracelet work. A landline phone is critical to allow her Aunt to stay safely at home.

Cindy from Jump River lives in a low area and said she cannot get any cell reception. She was worried about reaching emergency services. “I have my landline and I wouldn’t want to give it up.”

Helen Marks Dicks, AARP’s Associate State Director/Advocacy Director, asked seniors to call their elected representatives and “tell them why landline service is so important to them.” People should “ask their legislator to request a hearing on SB 240.” The bill is in the Senate Committee on Workforce Development, Public Works and Military Affairs chaired by Senator Roger Roth.

You can use the AARP hotline to call for action: 844-254-6876. Call now – while you still can!