

Rural Wisconsin: "Don't Lose the Home Phone"

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This week Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about the problems with phone coverage in rural Wisconsin. Often in rural areas cell coverage can be spotty or simply nonexistent. People rely on their land-line phone to communicate with the rest of the world. Legislation was passed in 2011 that ended the requirement of a "provider of last resort" protection for consumers so Kathleen teamed up with AARP to reinstate this requirement.

ALMA - "My cell phone doesn't work at home, so here's my home number," I told the constituent. "My home phone is the best way to reach me."

If you live in rural Buffalo, Eau Claire, Trempealeau, Pierce, or at least eight other northern or western Wisconsin counties you or your neighbors likely have poor cell coverage. A recent analysis of the coverage maps of 5 major firms shows customers in at least 12 Wisconsin counties face a lack of cell coverage.

Most of us in rural counties have adapted. We don't expect the cell phone to work and we don't bother calling cell numbers for rural neighbors. But what happens if you pick up the old landline and it's dead?

That's what residents in Fire Island, New York are now facing. And if big phone companies have their way, your landline could be gone by the end of this decade.

A recent story in the *Washington Post* detailed the problems local residents of Fire Island faced after Hurricane Sandy. Following the storm, residents discovered their home phone company,

Verizon, refused to repair torn and waterlogged phone lines.

Customers surrounding Washington, D.C. complained of aggressive Verizon sales representatives forcing customers to abandon their copper line home phones in return for expensive newer technology. Customers who want to return to their copper line phone cannot switch back.

According to the National Regulatory Research Institute, Wisconsin was one of 21 states that deregulated phone companies between 2010 and April 2012. The study detailed similar legislation pending in another 14 states. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a corporate "bill mill", is a driving force behind telephone deregulation.

The predominant carrier in Wisconsin, AT&T, lobbied for the deregulation bill that passed early in 2011. One provision of the new law ended the 100-year-old agreement between customers and the utility that brought reliable phone service to every part of Wisconsin.

When the deregulation bill was debated in the Senate I authored several amendments to protect consumers including one to keep the requirement for the "provider of last resort." This meant if no other phone company provided service for you, your local phone company couldn't come in and pull the plug.

Unfortunately my amendment failed and the new law passed that allowed companies to quit serving areas regardless of whether or not customers have other options. This part of the new law went into effect in early May 2013.

At the time the law passed, proponents argued a federal law protected people from losing local phone service. But last November, AT&T petitioned the federal government to remove those requirements.

According to the July *Washington Post* article, AT&T wrote that 70% of customers in their 22-state region chose to use wireless or internet based voice services. The company claimed landline phone service was "obsolete".

But for many of us having a landline phone is not just a convenience; it is critical for commerce, health and safety. Rural electricity can be unreliable, law enforcement is far away, internet can be dial-up and fax machines are vital to rural commerce.

Many rural businesses could not function without a landline phone. Companies rely on the phone for orders, connecting with vendors and approving credit card transactions or checking bank balances.

Our Wisconsin countryside is aging. Sometimes elderly folks need heart monitors or Lifeline services. But these services don't work over cell phones. The industries of rural Wisconsin, agriculture and mining, top the list for dangerous occupations. The landline phone can mean the difference between life and death.

Ambulance response time may already be 20 minutes; driving somewhere to find cell coverage means more precious time lost when lives are on the line.

The health and safety of our neighbors should concern us all. This is why I teamed up with AARP Wisconsin to draft and promote legislation that would reinstate the "provider of last resort" law.

This summer I am working with advocates to bring attention to potential problems in rural Wisconsin without a landline phone and the need for this legislation.

Please spread the word. And give your neighbors a call - while you still can.

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