

'It's just tragic': After days without internet, cell service, Southwestern residents feel endangered

June 20 2022, by Amanda Lee Myers



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Within minutes of losing cellphone and internet service, residents in a remote swath of Arizona were quick to come up with theories about why.

"I think it's the government. I don't trust them," said one resident in the tiny town of Eagar, a four-hour drive northeast of Phoenix on the Arizona-New Mexico state line.

Turns out, someone shot up exposed fiber cables, knocking out communications for up to 100,000 people in Navajo and Apache counties for more than 48 hours between June 11 and 13.

The dayslong outage reminded people in the area just how easily cut off from civilization they can be. It made many feel forgotten and vulnerable.

Outages happen with regularity in the area and though often brief, the unreliability creates a [safety issue](#), said Chief Lance Spivey of the St. Johns Police Department.

"You go from modern-day to the 1800s and you can't do anything," he said, adding that residents couldn't reach 911 during the recent outage.

"In Los Angeles, you ever hear of 911 going out?" he said. "I work in the valley (Phoenix) and I never heard of 911 not working. It's just tragic."

Spivey partially attributes one death to the outage.

He said concerned residents were checking on vulnerable community members during the outage and found a 74-year-old man lying on the floor in distress in his home on Sunday. Unable to call 911, they drove to find an ambulance, which went to the man's home and raced him to the hospital.

He died of a [heart attack](#) right around the time he arrived at the hospital, Spivey said.

"If 911 had been working, it would have been a two-second phone call and help would have been on the way," he said. "You lose sleep ... Your mind doesn't turn off. You wake up thinking, 'What the heck is going on?'"

"It's frustrating," he continued, tearing up. "We can't do the job that we want to do, simple as that."

Infrastructure attacks expose vulnerabilities

The recent trouble began on the afternoon of June 11 after someone shot up an aerial fiber cable belonging to the Norwalk, Connecticut-based Frontier Communications outside the tiny unincorporated community of Woodruff. They shot one area of the cable and another part 3 miles away in broad daylight, said Navajo County Sheriff David Clouse.

No suspects have been identified, and Frontier is offering a \$10,000 reward for information leading to an arrest.

Clouse said the culprit could be someone with malicious intent but could just as easily be bored kids.

A strikingly similar shooting happened to the cables seven years ago, causing an outage that lasted at least four days, but it's unclear if there's any connection. No one was arrested in that shooting.

Attacks on infrastructure in the U.S. have previously drawn attention to the vulnerability of telecommunications systems. In Nashville, Tennessee, for instance, a bombing at AT&T's central office on Christmas Day in 2020 brought communications from Georgia to Kentucky to a halt, affecting 911 centers, hospitals and more.

In addition to [emergency services](#), the outage in Arizona required many

gas stations and stores to only accept cash for two days. Landlines at grocery stores, [gas stations](#) and RV parks became hot spots for people to reach out to [family members](#) and let them know they were fine.

Some folks stocked up on supplies and many reassessed their preparedness for something more serious.

"It's surprising how fast people started kind of getting in a little panic," said 72-year-old Steve Stephenson, a retired schoolteacher and Air Force veteran living at the F-Diamond RV Park in Eagar.

"People's imaginations started getting carried away with them," he said. "They started saying, 'Do we have enough food? Do we have enough cash? You have enough bullets, guns? Mostly probably if they needed to hunt.'"

As a retiree whose friends are mostly in their 60s and 70s with varying [health issues](#), Stephenson said he's concerned about 911 outages.

"If there was an emergency during that period of time, that'd be pretty bad luck," he said. "We'd pretty much have to just load them up and take them to the ER."

Breonna Ellington of St. Johns said she had to do just that when her 5-year-old daughter cut herself badly after a fall while playing on Sunday.

She couldn't call 911 so she drove 30 minutes to the nearest hospital, which couldn't handle the injury, she told Fox 10 in Phoenix. They waited hours while the hospital tried to reach other facilities before deciding to drive four hours to Phoenix Children's Hospital.

Eight hours after the fall, Ellington's daughter finally got medical care.

"It's scary, and this shouldn't be a problem that we have," she told The Associated Press. "I'm so glad that my little girl was OK. I hope they get it fixed so this doesn't happen to any other parent who isn't as lucky."

'We're looking for the culprit'

Spivey and Clouse said that Frontier Communications should have been able to correct vulnerabilities to the system after its cables got shot seven years ago, from protecting the exposed lines to creating redundancies in the system.

Frontier spokeswoman Chrissy Murray said the [rugged terrain](#) in the area makes it difficult to bury the cables and the company is discussing network redundancy though she didn't have a timeline.

"We're concerned with how can we best help the community ... how can we fix this problem and how can it work with the community leaders to make it better," she said. "And obviously we're looking for the culprit of this and trying to understand why somebody would intentionally vandalize the Frontier fiber lines."

Audrey Orona, who owns Wildfire Espresso and Smoothie Bar on Main Street in Eagar, said the outage validated her decision to maintain a landline.

As soon as the [outage](#) happened, she called her family to tell them not to worry if they couldn't reach her or her 85-year-old mother.

"The landline was a protection," she said. "It does cost more than it ever used to but I feel safe having it. If towers go out, if satellites go out, whatever, at least my landline still works."

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Citation: 'It's just tragic': After days without internet, cell service, Southwestern residents feel endangered (2022, June 20) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2022-06-tragic-days-internet-cell-southwestern.html>

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