



Phones fail across territory

Emergency service providers scrambled to coordinate after a NorthwesTel equipment failure caused the loss of 911, landline, cellphone and internet services across the territory Thursday morning.

JACQUELINE RONSON / Sep. 21, 2012 9:00 a.m. / NEWS

Emergency service providers scrambled to coordinate after a NorthwesTel equipment failure caused the loss of 911, landline, cellphone and internet services across the territory Thursday morning.

“We haven’t seen an outage of this scope in the Yukon before,” said Emily Younker, the corporate communications manager for NorthwesTel.

The trouble started some time before midnight when a tree fell on a major transmission line near McIntyre Creek, causing a widespread blackout across Whitehorse.

In cases of power outages, the NorthwesTel system is designed to effortlessly move to battery and then diesel power. This happens dozens of times a year with out interrupting telecommunication services, said Curtis Shaw, NorthwesTel's vice president of marketing.

However, something went wrong with the equipment that allows the system to move between power sources, said Younker.

At around 4 a.m., services knocked out across the territory.

“It's kind of a special situation, a bit of a perfect storm, because as the phones were out, typically we'd be calling, sending alarms to our technicians to come in and start working on it immediately,” said Younker.

“In this case, it was mostly knocking on doors to get the correct team together to come in and find out first what the problem is, and then how to fix it.”

Meanwhile, Yukoners were slowly waking up to the realization that they could not call for help if they needed it.

Emergency plans were enacted at both the city and territorial level.

The fire department knocked on doors to bring in extra staff and put a truck with lights flashing outside the fire hall as a beacon for anyone in need.

[image2]

Emergency Medical Services set up satellite stations at the Canada Games Centre and in the old Canadian Tire parking

lot to be available to respond to emergencies.

The city's public works crews checked the water and sewage systems, because their automatic alarm systems depend on landlines.

Government departments communicated with each other over handheld radios and satellite phones.

The Yukon Amateur Radio Association helped establish an early communication network.

“By 5 o'clock we had chatter on our radio throughout the system,” said Terry Maher, the association's president.

And the territory's major radio stations: CBC, CHON and CKRW played an important role in keeping citizens informed about how to access emergency services if the need arose.

Northwestel's technicians were able to restore power to their systems some time between 8:30 and 9 a.m.

They then began to reset the systems one at a time, with a focus on emergency services.

Some landline and wireless services came back online around 9 a.m. By 11, cellphones were back up and all but about 600 landlines scattered throughout the Whitehorse area were working.

RCMP, fire officials, EMS and the hospital reported no major incidents during the time when communications were down.

The hospital did need to summon a particular doctor in the early hours of the morning, and RCMP and EMS assisted by going to that doctor's house to deliver the message.

Some Whitehorse businesses operated on a cash-only basis while debit and credit machines were down, while others closed altogether.

The Java Connection issued IOUs to cash-strapped customers eager for their morning caffeine fix.

By the late afternoon, some residents were still without internet service.

Yunker explained that two teams of technicians worked to ensure all service was restored.

“Now we’ve got to start the investigation. What exactly went wrong, what equipment failed, why it failed and how we can prevent that from ever happening again,” said Yunker.

Elaine Taylor, minister of community services, said all of the first responders did an excellent job of coming together.

“Given the circumstances, I think that everyone has done their very best.”

She reminded Yukoners of the 72-hour rule: everyone should be prepared to sustain themselves for at least three days in the event of an extended power outage or other emergency, such as this one.

“This type of event very much reminds us of the importance of emergency preparedness.”

Contact Jacqueline Ronson at

jronson@yukon-news.com