

Weather disrupting San Antonio internet, cellphone, cable services

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In addition to a slew of other hardships stemming from this week's winter storm, many San Antonians have battled spotty internet, cellphone and cable service.

The problems are part of cascading effects of widespread power outages, and a lack of information has made a treacherous situation more so for those unable to receive updates from the city government and utilities.

As of Thursday, DownDetector.com, which tracks service outages, showed problems with multiple San Antonio-area providers, including Spectrum, Grande, Suddenlink, AT&T, T-Mobile and Verizon. Other providers, including GVTC and HCTC, also reported outages.

Even telephone landlines, which are usually less affected by power disruptions, have had problems.

"Rural phone companies have experienced some outages, mostly power-related," said Mark Seale, executive director of the Texas Telephone Association, a trade organization.

"Lack of commercial power remains our primary challenge at this time," Spectrum spokesman Brian Anderson said. "Even if the lights are on at one location, power outages at other places in the network can still result in service interruptions."

While most providers blame power outages and the "extreme weather conditions," the storm is laying bare vulnerabilities with communication systems.

"Beyond AM radio, all modern communications need a whole separate set of power sources in order to operate," said Brian Kelley, an associate professor of

electrical and computer engineering at the University of Texas at San Antonio. “So power is intricately tied to them.”

Home internet runs to exchanges and data centers just as cellphone service travels through cellphone towers, or base stations, and data centers. Power disruptions at any of these hubs will affect connectivity, according to Kelley.

Cell and internet providers have service agreements with utilities about guaranteed power at communication facilities, and the providers determine their emergency power requirements — batteries or generators — based on that information.

Service providers are “somewhat at the mercy of power companies because they can only plan for so much,” he said. “If the utility provider is not reliable or is not able to provide the service that is really needed, that’s where their networks fail.”

Companies contacted Thursday didn’t say how many of their customers were without service.

In addition to power problems, the frigid weather also can cause hardware to fail, according to Bruce Forey, founder of BroadMax Group, an internet consulting company.

Each internet service provider “operates differently and has different strategies about how they’re going to handle their operations in times of inclement weather,” Forey said. “Everyone has different modes of crisis operations. And some, as we’re finding out with our power outage, are stronger than others as far as having the capability to overcome crisis situations.”

GVTC spokesperson John Hill said service problems fluctuate with the power outages.

“We do have backup generators that we are using to help provide support for our network,” he said.

Several companies have notices posted on their websites about service outages and extended wait times for customer service because of closures or decreased staffing.

On Thursday, Grande tweeted, “Customers may experience service disruptions, even when your power is back on, due to power outages that impact our equipment that transmit services to you.”

The outages, which decreased Thursday, are sporadic across the region.

Customers lucky enough to have some connectivity expressed their frustrations with a lack of service and information on social media.

One AT&T customer on Thursday tweeted: “Fiber has been out in San Antonio near downtown for days now. We can’t get any updates on a timeline to restore service. Very frustrating when my neighbors are online with Spectrum.”

But Spectrum is having issues, too. Multiple people tweeted questions to the company, with most asking when they’ll have their service back.

T-Mobile’s website said the company is “providing unlimited talk, text and data for T-Mobile, Sprint and Metro by T-Mobile customers in Texas who are not already on unlimited plans” through Saturday.

Power and communications are critical to responding to natural disasters, according to Thomas Tunstall, senior research director at UTSA’s Institute for Economic Development.

These pieces of infrastructure “must be hardened to withstand the most devastating forms of natural disasters,” he said. “Without the foundational components of energy and communication, the picture goes dark and relief efforts stumble about blindly or haphazardly.”