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Verizon has told its field technicians in Pennsylvania that they can be fired if they try to fix broken copper phone lines. Instead, employees must try to replace copper lines with a device that connects to Verizon Wireless's cell phone network.

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The wireless home phone service, VoiceLink, is not a proper replacement for copper

This directive came in a memo from Verizon to workers on September 20. "Failure to follow this directive may result in disciplinary action up to and including dismissal," the memo said. It isn't clear whether this policy has been applied to Verizon workers outside of Pennsylvania. The memo and other documents were made public by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) union, which asked the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission to put a stop to the forced copper-to-wireless

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phone lines because it doesn't work with security alarms, fax machines, medical devices such as pacemakers that require telephone monitoring, and other services, the union said. "Field technicians are required to have VoiceLink units on their trucks and to refuse to repair copper plant serving voice-only customers," CWA local President James Gardler wrote in [testimony](#) presented to the state Utility Commission. "Our members are being told that if they actually try to repair copper plant instead of using VoiceLink, they will be subject to disciplinary action by Verizon."

The memo to field technicians says that in order to give customers the "best possible network performance in non-FiOS areas, Verizon will migrate as many customers experiencing trouble on their line to VoiceLink as possible." When technicians visit the homes of voice-only customers with copper phone line problems, they must first determine whether the customer can be connected to the VoiceLink wireless service. If VoiceLink is available and there is "trouble... in the Verizon [copper] network," the technician must install the wireless service. "If the customer does qualify, follow the VoiceLink Migration installation/migration procedure and complete the migration," the memo says.

Technicians can fix the copper line "if the customer does not qualify" for wireless service. In those cases, the tech must document the reason the customer didn't qualify for VoiceLink. "It is a requirement that migration to VoiceLink be your first option when the customer qualifies and the trouble is in Verizon's network," the memo says. Another memo tells workers that they should only restore copper phone service if they can verify that the wireless VoiceLink won't work. VoiceLink devices connect a home's inside wiring to Verizon's cellular network.

Gardler discussed the situation at length in his testimony before the Utility Commission. "We are seeing increasing numbers of dissatisfied customers whose service goes out when it rains or who simply have no dial tone at all," Gardler wrote. "We know the reasons why—the cable is bad and needs to be replaced; air pressure systems are not working properly; and backup batteries are not replaced when they wear out. But we are powerless to make the changes that would provide good service to customers because Verizon is not willing to spend the money, or hire the people needed, to repair the service. Instead, we're told to install VoiceLink for voice-only customers and allow the copper network to deteriorate even further."

Verizon has installed VoiceLink at more than 1,000 locations in Pennsylvania in the last seven months, Gardler wrote. When Verizon employees went on [strike](#) for 44 days this year, replacement workers installed VoiceLink "as a permanent fix" instead of a temporary solution until the strike ended, he wrote.

Voice-only customers who get VoiceLink won't be able to add DSL Internet service later or hook up certain types of devices such as security alarms and pacemakers, he wrote. "Verizon should not be permitted to remove important functions from the network through the piecemeal installation of VoiceLink, just to save some money in the short-term," Gardler wrote.

Replacing old phone lines with wireless is part of a long-term, nationwide transition from the primarily copper-based Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) to Internet Protocol (IP)-based voice services that rely on network technologies such as fiber and wireless. The FCC has encouraged carriers to [replace copper with fiber](#), but it requires them to seek permission before shutting off copper networks in cases where they intend to reduce or discontinue service.

Gardler didn't allege any violations of FCC rules but asked the state Utility Commission to "prohibit Verizon from using VoiceLink as a permanent solution." (Verizon should be able to use VoiceLink as a temporary substitute during emergencies such as natural disasters, he said.) Gardler also wants the commission

to "require Verizon to substantially increase its budget for maintenance and repair of copper facilities in non-FIOS areas" and expand fiber service to unserved areas.

The commission should conduct a thorough audit of Verizon maintenance and repair practices in areas where it hasn't replaced copper with fiber, he wrote. The CWA [said](#) that last year it documented more than 200 examples in 13 counties where Verizon failed to provide safe facilities by refusing to replace or repair damaged equipment or by failing to control falling trees and vegetation near equipment. A union survey of outside plant technicians found that 96.5 percent say it's common for Verizon to fail to assign a technician to restore service within 24 hours and that 95.1 percent of technicians say management has refused to authorize repair or replacement of cable that the technicians have reported as defective within the past year, the [CWA said](#).

We asked Verizon some questions about the VoiceLink memo today but haven't heard back yet. (*Verizon has responded: See update below.*) In a statement to [FierceTelecom last week](#), Verizon denied neglecting its copper network. "We're reviewing the testimony and we'll have a chance to respond formally at a later date, but the CWA leadership's assertions that Verizon is neglecting its wireline network are false," Verizon said. "The reality is that Verizon continues to make substantial investments in the wireline network each year—more than \$3.4 billion last year alone."

Verizon's use of VoiceLink to replace broken copper lines has been controversial for years. In 2013, Verizon sought permission from state officials in New York to end wireline service in [western Fire Island](#), which had been hit hard by Hurricane Sandy the previous year. After protests from residents, advocacy groups, and government officials, Verizon backtracked and [promised to install fiber instead](#). Verizon has been accused of neglecting copper networks in other states, such as New Jersey, where rural towns are currently [seeking a state investigation](#) into widespread service problems.

Update: Verizon has responded to our questions and offered its own interpretation of the memo. "Our first responsibility to a customer out of service is to restore service as quickly as possible," a Verizon spokesperson said. "Verizon, the unions and the regulators all agree that service restoration is paramount. We have a device [VoiceLink] that can restore service immediately for a specific set of customers. I think it's hard to argue with disciplining someone who intentionally leaves a customer without service."

Verizon explained the circumstances in which it repairs copper service. "If the serving wire from the pole to the house is cut or has a tree [interfering with it], we'll tell our technicians to address the situation," the company said. "But in cases where the trouble proves to be in the copper cable requiring another truck roll (which will extend the out-of-service condition), it makes sense to restore service to the customer immediately. The tech can do this with VoiceLink. The goal here is to restore service as quickly as possible to the customer."

Verizon said it does not use VoiceLink when a customer has alarms or other systems that depend on a wired phone connection. But VoiceLink has been used as "both a temporary and permanent" replacement for wireline service by thousands of customers, the company said. Verizon said it doesn't need FCC approval for moving copper customers to wireless, because the FCC rules "apply to the retirement of copper, not the restoration of individual customers' services. The FCC is well aware of VoiceLink." The spokesperson was not aware of any similar memos being sent to Verizon employees in states outside Pennsylvania. — **Ars Technica**

Federal Communications Commission Chairman Tom Wheeler is still claiming that his 2015 internet takeover has encouraged innovation, investment and economic

growth online. That's not what the evidence shows.

The U.S. economy continues to create jobs, but there's a big exception. Companies making computer and electronic products and in the telecommunications side of the information industry employed 29,000 fewer workers in August than they did a year earlier. These disappointing results follow a recent update from economist Hal Singer, who has tracked broadband investment since Mr. Wheeler's FCC imposed monopoly telephone rules from the 1930s on the competitive internet.

Mr. Wheeler's acolytes on the nonprofit left pretend that the rules haven't harmed investment in high-speed networks. They do this by counting spending by the owners of broadband networks on things other than their broadband networks—such as television shows. Mr. Singer specifically looks at capital expenditures on network infrastructure. He finds that, after an era of growth, the 12 largest U.S. internet service providers reduced investment by 8% in the first six months of this year compared to the same period in 2014, the last year before the new regulatory regime. This is what has become known in the industry as the "Wheeler tax."

Couldn't FCC economists have easily predicted that highly complex and burdensome rules would discourage investment? Probably, which may be why Mr. Wheeler wasn't interested in their opinions. His "Open Internet" rules, hastily crafted to comply with a public command from President Obama to the supposedly independent agency, were never subjected to a formal cost-benefit analysis. The commission's chief economist in 2014, Tim Brennan, declared after leaving the FCC that the rules were an "economics-free zone." Mr. Brennan has since called his comment "part of an off-hand joke" and said that while the rule did include some economics, "a fair amount of the economics was wrong, unsupported, or irrelevant."

Internet broadband networks have since become a growth-free zone for investment and jobs. If this jewel of American technology and opportunity now becomes an innovation-free zone, consumers, investors and workers will have every right to blame Mr. Wheeler. – *Wall Street Journal*



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