Hurricane still keeping telecoms down

September 1 2005

Just days after Hurricane Katrina made communication nearly impossible in the Gulf Coast region, national wireless phone companies said they did everything they could to prevent loss of service.

Representatives for Verizon Wireless, Sprint and Cingular all said they were as prepared as they could be for the hurricane and are functioning as well as they can given all the damage that's occurred.

"We were as prepared as we could be," said Dawn Benton, regional public relations manager for Cingular. "We have experience in handling these types of crises."

Verizon Wireless spokeswoman Sheryl Sellaway echoed Benton's sentiments. "We were prepared as best we could be," she said. "We had a lot of planning and preparation."

"We were prepared as much as anyone could prepare for something like this," said Sprint Network spokesman Charles Fleckenstein. "I don't think any company can be ready for something like this."

Mobile communication was rendered nearly impossible in the areas hardest hit by Katrina due to the hurricane's damage and also the spike in phone use spurred by the hurricane.

Service has now been at least somewhat restored, aside from New Orleans, which is inaccessible.

According to Sellaway, Verizon learned a lot from the hurricanes that hit Florida last year. Sellaway said Verizon set up backup power generators, maximized call capacities through technical procedures and provided COWs (Cells on Wheels), or mobile cell units.

Benton similarly said Cingular imported generators, COWs and teams of restoration technicians on standby.

Additionally, Benton said, Cingular "had resources and manpower in neighboring states available to us."

Benton also said Cingular is offering free calling stations at all open Cingular Store locations in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. They are open for anyone to make calls free of charge.

Cingular has also set up a free mobile calling station in Lafayette, La., where many evacuees are being housed, according to Benton.

Fleckenstein said Sprint put to use knowledge it gained from last year's Florida hurricanes.

"We strengthened ties with state emergency operating centers and worked closer with government agencies to get credentialed to enter the areas," he said. "It's more a tweaking process than an overhaul."

Sellaway said Verizon is still assessing what they have learned from Hurricane Katrina.

"From this crisis we will probably gain further insight about hurricane preparedness," she said. "If you ask me after this week, I could probably give specific items."

Benton was more certain. "We would do nothing different; we were as

prepared as we could be," she said.

According to a Cingular news release, network disruptions have been mostly cleared up outside of New Orleans. Benton said this is because of access problems.

"We can't get into New Orleans because the city is restricting access for safety reasons," she said. The city, situated 6 feet below sea level, is still under as much as 20 feet of water, according to CNN.

"New Orleans is not a safe place to be right now," said Fleckenstein. "We have to get in and assess the damage, and then start repairs."

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