

Communications Sector Group

Warrnambool Factsheet – Individuals

Communications Interruptions: Information for Consumers

Communications are important. We rely on communications services - such as phones and the internet - to run businesses, contact friends and family, and manage our day-to-day activities. While communications providers design and build resilient systems, there are situations where outages occur. It's important to plan for potential outages.

How communications services are delivered

When you make a phone call or use the internet, your service relies on a long chain of communications infrastructure. For example, a phone call from a mobile phone to a landline may travel from the mobile phone to the closest-available mobile base station, to a large telephone exchange, to the call recipient's closest exchange and then across telephone lines to the recipient's house.

What happens during an outage

Networks are designed with strong redundancy or outage recovery measures which are effective in the vast majority of cases. However, in extreme events – power outages, fires, floods, for instance – communications outages may still occur. The event may impact some or all of the infrastructure critical to the delivery of communication services. The type of infrastructure affected can greatly alter the scale of the outage experienced. For example, an extreme weather event which causes widespread flooding may affect more than one provider and could impact over 100,000 people, whereas a power outage at a small telephone exchange may impact less than 1,000 people.

The services affected during a communications outage can include any number of the following:

- landline services
- mobile phone services
- ATM and EFTPOS operation
- internet access
- personal alert devices.

How to prepare for an outage

Given our increasing reliance on communications, it is important to think about how a prolonged outage could affect you or your business, and how you can minimise the impact of service disruptions.

There are a number of services which may be lost during a communications outage. It's important to consider which of these services are necessary in your day-to-day life or business operations. There are simple steps your household can take to minimise the impact of any service disruptions. The following questions might help:

- Do you rely on your landline to contact family?
- Do you rely on the internet to conduct business?
- Would losing internet access impact your ability to carry out routine activities like accessing services, or paying bills?

You should consider:

- maintaining a charged mobile phone in case you need to call the Triple Zero emergency call service (000) if there is a prolonged outage of landline services. Remember: all mobiles – even those without credit or a SIM – can 'roam' to any available mobile tower, regardless of carrier, when contacting 000.
- making a note of important phone numbers like local emergency service organisations including police, fire and ambulance, and your branch of the State Emergency Service (SES).

What to do during an incident

Should you experience a major communications outage in your area, there are a number of things you can do to reduce the effect on you and your family.

During an outage, you should:

- check your mobile phone for coverage
- check on any family members who rely on personal alert devices like medical alert devices
- check on neighbours, especially if they are elderly as they may not have mobile phones
- visit another location, such as a friend's house, internet café or a library which may still have services available
- contact your service provider to determine the nature, extent and potential duration of the outage. Because a number of communications channels might be down during an outage, this could mean checking updates on webpages or social media, or visiting a local shopfront for information.
- contact local government, for example your local council, as they may be offering assistance for certain services that are unavailable
- if possible, tune in to local television and radio stations which may be providing updates on the outage and any associated emergency alerts. Remember: a battery-powered radio will still operate when the mains power goes off (just make sure you keep the batteries charged).

Understanding how services are restored

There is no specific priority for the restoration of communications services after an outage, however providers are likely to follow a pattern similar to the one outlined below:

- restore critical services (for example, services provided to hospitals and priority assistance customers)
- repair infrastructure, such as larger telephone exchanges supplying large groups of customers and broadcast transmission facilities
- repair any other damaged infrastructure
- restore services to any individual customers who remain affected.

The time it takes to restore communications services will depend on the cause of the outage, the providers and types of services affected. Following the preparation steps outlined above is the best way to stay informed about the progress of the restoration of services. It is important to consider how you might access a range of alternative sources of information, such as internet, phone and radio, so you can stay updated during an outage.

Further information:

- www.communications.gov.au/telephone_services/warrnambool_inquiry
- www.triplezero.gov.au
- www.disasterassist.gov.au