



AT&T:
Abandoning Rural & Other
Communities in Ohio



AT&T is abandoning rural Ohio and many urban and suburban communities in the state. AT&T has a statutory obligation to “ensure the adequacy and reliability of basic local exchange service [...] and the adequacy and reliability of voice service throughout the state.”¹ Yet through systemic disrepair of its traditional landline network, too many Ohio customers can no longer rely on AT&T to meet its statutory obligation to provide reliable telecommunications service.

In Ohio, AT&T has focused its resources on building its all-fiber network to select neighborhoods in the Cleveland, Columbus, Akron, Dayton, and Canton metro areas.² It is also upgrading its wireless network. CWA supports these investments. However, AT&T’s all-fiber deployment is limited to 12 million customer locations nationwide, representing less than one-quarter of the estimated 55 million customer locations in its 21-state wireline footprint.³ Every Ohio community needs access to quality wireline and wireless networks, including competitive choice among high-speed broadband providers.

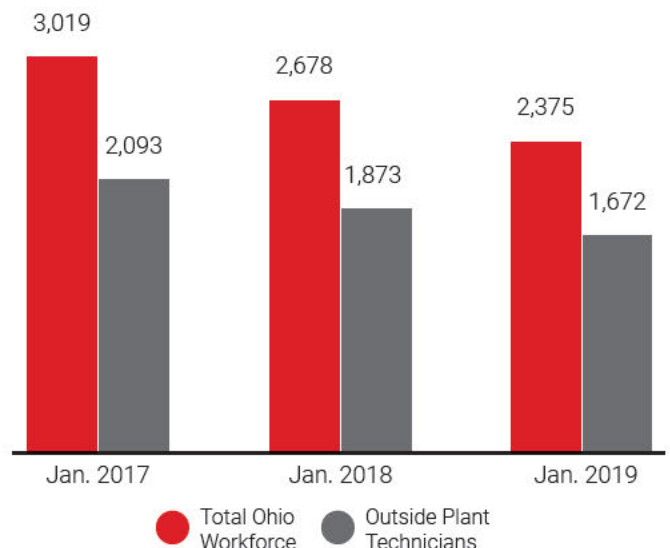
In many communities, AT&T voice service is a lifeline for customers. Wireless service is spotty and more expensive than wireline. Wireless service also depends on well-maintained wireline networks. In many suburban and urban neighborhoods in Ohio, AT&T has not upgraded its traditional copper network to fiber. Slow DSL

does not provide the Internet capacity families and businesses need to access today’s data-intensive online video services. And without competitive choice for high-speed Internet, monopoly cable charges high prices and delivers poor customer service.

This report documents the network problems that lead to service problems for customers and public safety hazards. Quality service depends on adequate staffing of trained, career employees. But over the last two years, AT&T has cut its Ohio workforce.

- Between Jan. 2017 and Jan. 2019, AT&T reduced its outside plant technicians in Ohio by 20 percent, dropping from 2,093 technicians in the state to just 1,672.
- Over the last two years, AT&T reduced its total Ohio wireline workforce – outside technicians, inside technicians, call center workers, and administrative staff – by 21 percent, from 3,019 to 2,375 workers across the state.
- AT&T reduced its Ohio call center workforce by 50 percent in the last two years.

In the Last Two Years, AT&T Cut its Ohio Workforce by 20%



AT&T has cut its workforce across the Midwest. Between Jan. 2017 and Jan. 2019, AT&T reduced its outside plant technicians across Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Illinois by 23 percent, dropping from 6,519 technicians to just 5,037. AT&T reduced its total Midwest wireline workforce by 23 percent, from 10,651 to 8,165 workers.

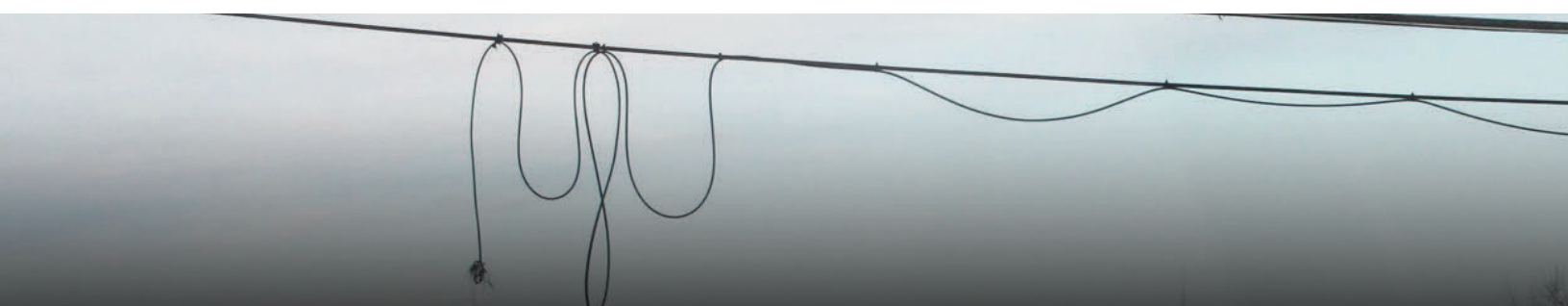
AT&T's network in rural and many urban and suburban areas is in disrepair. In Ohio and communities across the Midwest, copper cable, for many the only source of landline phone and Internet, is significantly damaged. The result is poor quality service and recurring service problems. But AT&T is not replacing damaged cable, opting instead for temporary fixes that treat the symptom but not the disease. For example, when it rains water can get into a damaged cable and cause static on the phone line or an outage. By the time AT&T sends an outside plant technician to address the customer complaint, often the cable has dried and service is restored. The same issue will happen the next time it rains. Rather than replacing the cable, which is labor-intensive and time-consuming, AT&T instructs its employees to fix problems quickly with temporary solutions and move on to the next project. The public can see this in the black and orange plastic bags littering AT&T's outside plant. These bags are designed to provide a short-term solution to damaged cable and equipment. But too often, the issues never get a permanent fix. The plastic bags deteriorate, leaving wires exposed and causing further deterioration leading to service problems for customers.

CWA, as part of its on-going obligation to its members, conducted an investigation at

AT&T facilities serviced by CWA members. The investigation focused on the condition of outside plant (readily observable from public streets and sidewalks) in rural and suburban areas of Ohio. In the course of its investigation, CWA uncovered numerous instances of facilities throughout Ohio in a dangerous state of disrepair that pose service and safety hazards. CWA has documented some of the most blatant effects of these practices and policies through photographs of AT&T facilities in plain sight from public areas throughout AT&T's service area. Since 2016, the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) received at least 6,434 complaints from AT&T customers in Ohio. Of that total, 79 percent (5,096 complaints) were service-related.⁴

Ohio reduced public oversight of the telecommunications industry with the passage of House Bill 402 in 2018.⁵ Deregulation proponents argued that competition could replace regulatory protections that held AT&T accountable for the quality of its service and, by extension, the condition of its network. But as the evidence in this report makes clear, eliminating public oversight and relying solely on competition has failed to ensure that AT&T meets its statutory obligation to provide "adequate and reliable" service to everyone in Ohio.

The AT&T network disrepair is a sign of deferred maintenance and insufficient investment. As the photos indicate, and a survey of CWA members confirms, AT&T has been inattentive to poor plant conditions and has not been investing the necessary resources to properly maintain its copper network, which is often the only means of communication



for rural, elderly, and other consumers. This systemic disrepair results in poor quality and repeat service complaints, such as when there is static on a phone line when it rains due to damaged cable. In many instances, it also leads to conditions that pose a safety risk like animals nesting in damaged terminals, exposed wires, or damaged telephone poles.

In the course of representing its members, CWA convened a roundtable of outside plant technicians from across the Midwest to learn about systemic problems at AT&T. AT&T's garages, the members say, are not stocking the necessary equipment to maintain the plant in rural and many urban and suburban areas. These workers discussed AT&T's rigid project timekeeping system that prevents them from taking the time necessary to do a thorough and complete repair of damaged cable or equipment. For example, if a serious problem takes more than a few hours to fix, managers encourage the workers to find a temporary solution or risk facing disciplinary action. The result is insufficient fixes, like brittle plastic bags placed over splice boxes, leading to further plant deterioration and future issues.

Most important, CWA members explained that they want to do their jobs to provide good service – but they need the equipment, time, and adequate staffing to do so.

As a result of the 20 percent workforce reduction at AT&T, customers are experiencing poor service due to lack of plant maintenance and long waits for repairs to fix issues. In some instances, the lack of a robust workforce can lead to dangerous situations. In Toledo, OH, a bridge collapse destroyed AT&T communication lines, leaving residents without phone or Internet service for a week. "There's nothing. It's dead," said one Toledo resident. "It's very frustrating because there's nobody to talk to, nobody who can tell me anything," said the director of a local food bank of AT&T's customer service. Another Toledo resident worried about his 71-year-old mother's access to emergency communications. "There's nobody here, she's by herself, and I want to make sure she has a

phone," the resident told the local news. "It's concerning, you know? You want your mom to have a phone if there's an emergency."⁶

AT&T's failure to invest in its landline network in Ohio and elsewhere is particularly egregious in light of the \$21 billion tax windfall that AT&T received from the federal *Tax Cut and Jobs Act* of 2017. During the debate over the legislation, AT&T CEO Randall Stephenson promised to use tax cuts to increase capital investment and create thousands of new jobs. AT&T got its tax cut – estimated at \$3 billion in 2018 alone – but slashed its capital investment the same year by \$1.4 billion. Since 2017, AT&T has cut more than 23,000 jobs.⁷

AT&T must invest in its network in rural and many urban and suburban areas to provide quality service to its customers in Ohio.

On the following pages are photos and descriptions documenting the systemic disrepair of AT&T's Ohio plant.



AT&T Copper Plant Photos – Ohio

1. This photo from Lafayette Street, Youngstown, OH, shows a severely damaged splice terminal. The terminal's protective case is completely deteriorated, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



2. This photo from Delaware Avenue, Youngstown, OH, shows a severely damaged splice terminal. The terminal's protective case is hanging open, and the black plastic covering meant to protect wires has fallen off, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



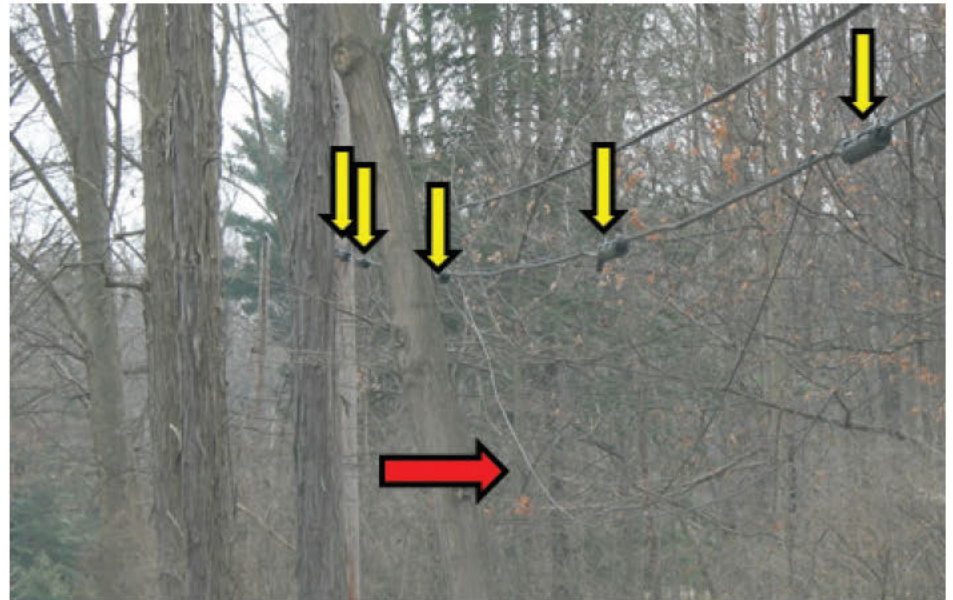
3. This photo from Emery Road, Warrensville Heights, OH, shows unsecured cable. The cable should be secured to the utility pole. The wind blows the unsecured service cable, damaging the copper inside the wire and causing service issues. In addition, this cable is within reach of passersby, causing a public safety hazard.



4. This photo from North Linden Lane, Parma, OH, shows a double-pole. The old pole (right, with a white spray-painted X) with only AT&T equipment attached to it is tied to the new pole with rope (yellow arrow) to prevent it from falling. AT&T has not moved its facilities to the new utility pole. As a result, AT&T's equipment remains connected to an old, deteriorating pole, causing potential service and safety concerns.



5. This photo from Hillcreek Lane, Gates Mills, OH, shows a badly damaged cable. Instead of replacing the cable, AT&T spliced the cable at least five times on a short strand of cable (yellow arrows). In addition, AT&T used drop wires (red arrow) to bypass sections of bad cable.



6. This photo from Gates Road, Gates Mills, OH, shows a damaged splice wrapped in a black plastic covering. Once the wrap deteriorates, wires are exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



7. This photo from Charles Street, Maple Heights, OH, shows a badly damaged cable. Instead of replacing the cable, AT&T attempted to resolve the problem with multiple splices in a span of a few feet on the cable. Each splice box covers a portion of damaged or defective cable.



8. This photo from Warrensville Center Road, Maple Heights, OH, shows an unsecured terminal hanging from service wires. The terminal should be secured to the pole. The terminal can fill with water, deteriorating wires and leading to service issues. In addition, a hanging terminal presents a public safety hazard to passersby.



9. This photo from East 135th Street, Garfield Heights, OH, shows a severely damaged splice box. The box's protective case has deteriorated, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



10. This photo from Evelyn Drive, Seven Hills, OH, shows an unsecured terminal hanging from service wires. The terminal should be secured to the pole. The terminal can fill with water, deteriorating wires and leading to service issues. In addition, a hanging terminal presents a public safety hazard.



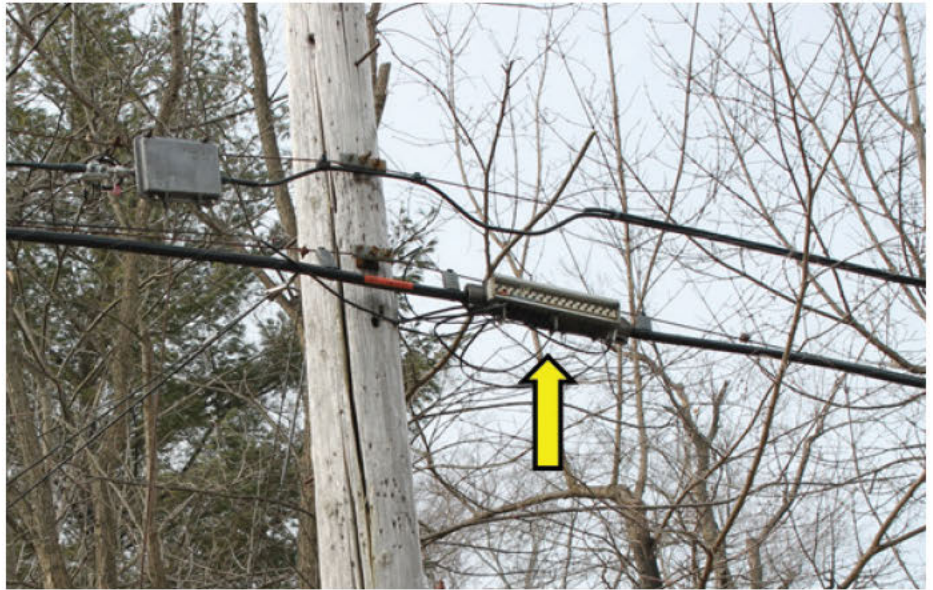
11. This photo from West 48th Street, Cleveland, OH, shows a badly damaged cable. Instead of replacing the cable, AT&T installed multiple splice boxes on the cable. Each splice box covers a portion of damaged or defective cable. AT&T also used thin drop wires to bypass sections of bad cable. Each of the numerous thin wires would have been installed in response to a separate customer complaint.



12. This photo from Brown Avenue, Newburgh Heights, OH, shows a severely damaged splice terminal. The terminal's protective case is hanging open, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



13. This photo from Forest Drive, Pepper Pike, OH, shows an exposed terminal (yellow arrow). The terminal's protective case is hanging open, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



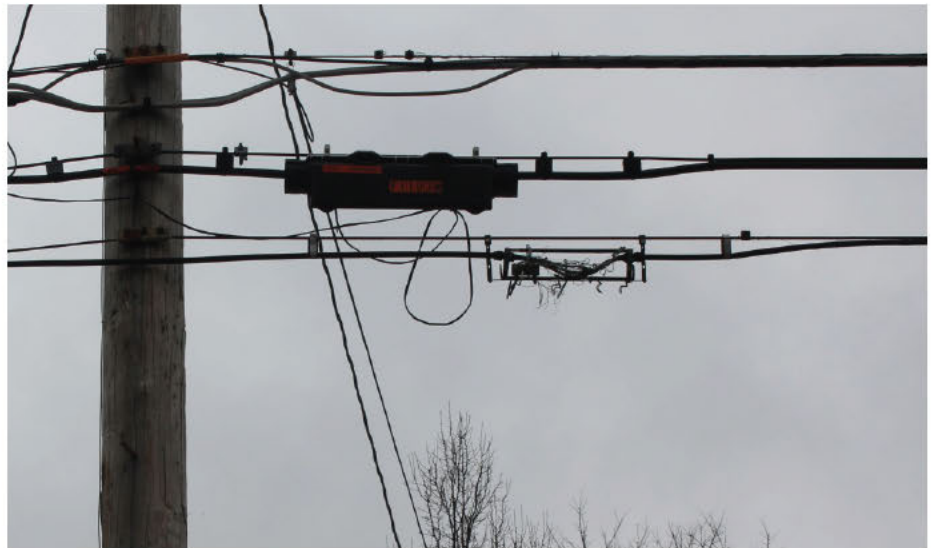
14. This photo from Broadview Road, Seven Hills, OH, shows a disconnected wire hanging above an intersection. The wire is secured to another wire, but the damaged wires are exposed to weather, leading to further degradation of the wire.



15. This photo from York Road, North Royalton, OH, shows a damaged splice wrapped in a black plastic covering. Once the wrap deteriorates, wires are exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



16. This photo from Wexford, Parma, OH, shows a severely damaged splice terminal. The terminal's protective case is missing, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



17. This photo from Emery Road, Chagrin Falls, OH, shows a damaged splice wrapped in a black plastic covering. Once the wrap deteriorates, wires are exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



18. This photo from Wolf Lane, Strongsville, OH shows a double-pole. Only AT&T equipment is attached to the old pole (right, with a white spray-painted X). AT&T has not moved its facilities to the new utility pole. As a result, AT&T's equipment remains connected to an old, deteriorating pole, causing potential service and safety concerns. In addition, AT&T's terminal is severely rusted.



19. This photo from South Thomas Road, Tallmadge Road, OH, shows a hanging pole, or a double-pole that has been cut before AT&T moved its facilities to the new pole. The old utility pole was cut with AT&T's terminal still attached to it. Left dangling, the old pole strains the cables and endangers the public. It is a service, worker, and public safety concern.



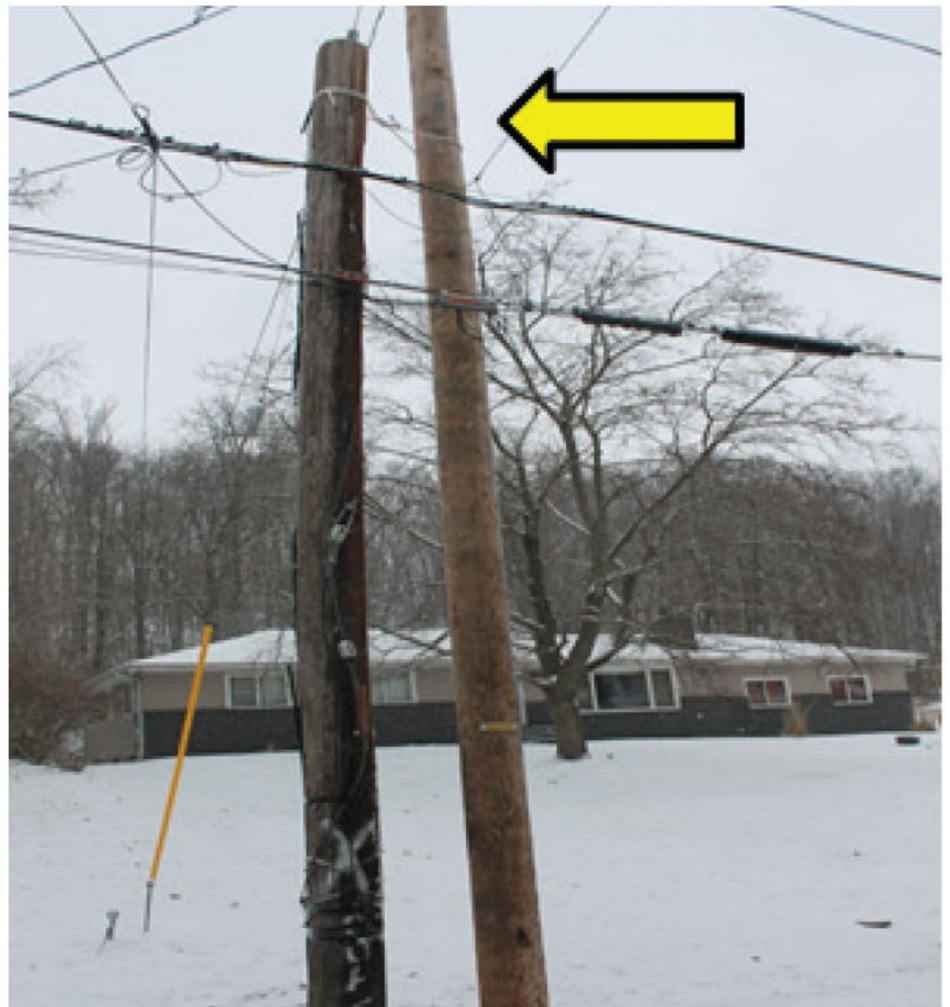
20. This photo from West 2nd Street, Girard, OH, shows a severely damaged cable. Some remnants of a black plastic cover remain. The cable is damaged, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



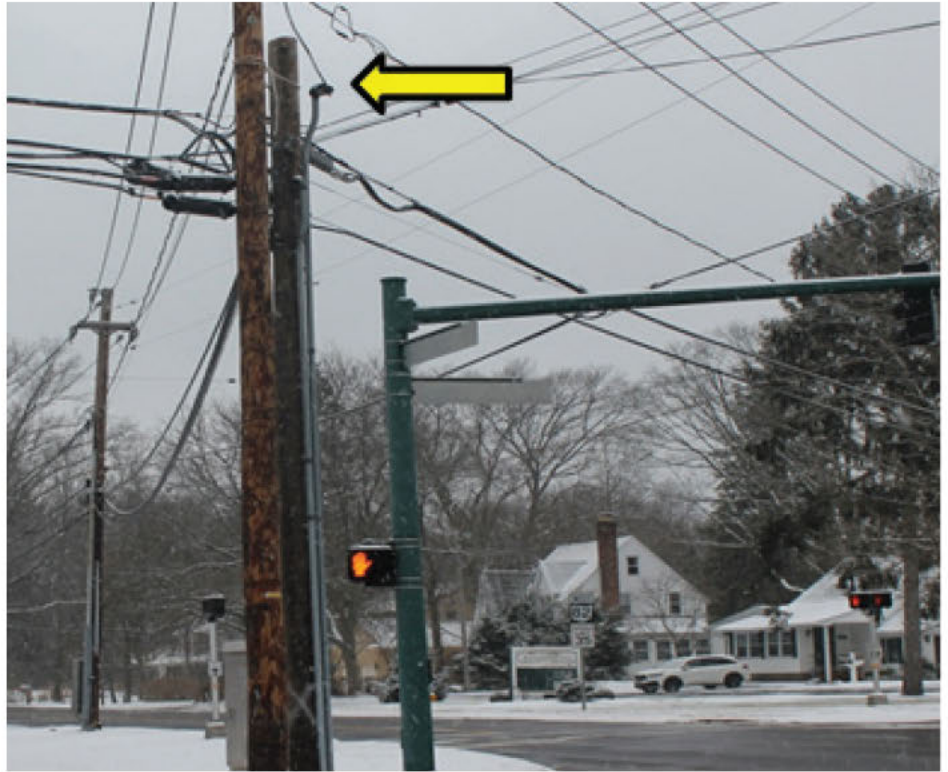
21. This photo from East 2nd Street, Girard, OH, shows a severely damaged splice terminal. The terminal's protective case is hanging open, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



22. This photo from Green Haven Parkway, Brecksville, OH, shows a double-pole. The old pole (left, with a white spray-painted X) with only AT&T equipment attached to it is tied to the new pole with rope to prevent it from falling (yellow arrow). AT&T has not moved its facilities to the new utility pole. As a result, AT&T's equipment remains connected to old, deteriorating poles, causing potential service and safety concerns.



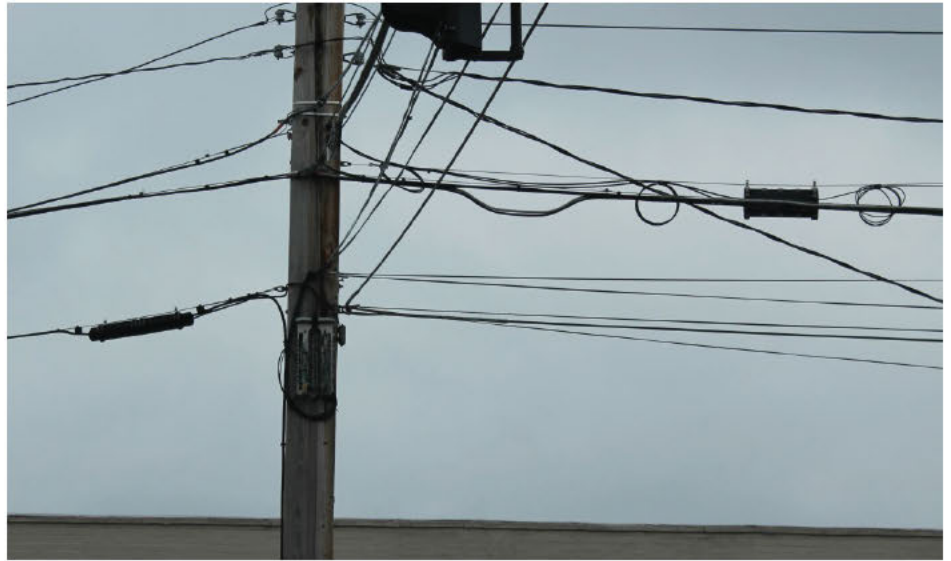
23. This photo from Route 82, Brecksville, OH, shows a double-pole. The old pole (right, with a white spray-painted X) with only AT&T equipment attached to it is tied to the new pole with rope to prevent it from falling (yellow arrow). AT&T has not moved its facilities to the new utility pole. As a result, AT&T's equipment remains connected to old, deteriorating poles, causing potential service and safety concerns.



24. This photo from Hillside Street, Cuyahoga Falls, OH, shows a badly damaged cable. Instead of replacing the cable, AT&T installed multiple splice boxes on the cable. Each splice box covers a portion of damaged or defective cable. AT&T also used drop wires to bypass sections of bad cable. Each of the numerous thin wires would have been installed in response to a separate customer complaint.



25. This photo from Hudson Drive, Cuyahoga Falls, OH, shows a severely damaged terminal. The terminal's protective case is missing, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



Endnotes

1. R.C. §4927.02(A)(1)
2. According to AT&T, it is also building fiber in the following Ohio locations: Bay Village, Mentor, Beachwood, Shaker Heights, Bedford, Bedford Heights, Norton, Barberton, Alliance, New Albany, Dublin, Hilliard, Oakwood, Ashville, Lakewood, and Cleveland Heights. A full list of AT&T's fiber cities is available at <https://www.att.com/shop/internet/gigapower/coverage-map.html> (last accessed May 24, 2019).
3. For all-fiber customer locations, see AT&T Q1 2019 Earnings Report, p. 47: <https://otp.tools.investis.com/clients/us/atnt2/sec/sec-show.aspx?FilingId=13407259&Cik=0000732717&Type=PDF&hasPdf=1>.
4. Following an information request, the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio provided CWA with complaints against AT&T between Jan. 1 2016 and May 9, 2019.
5. Text of the bill is available at: <https://www.legiscan.com/OH/bill/HB402/2017>
6. Michael Bratton, "Toledo AT&T customers without phone, internet service after Maumee Avenue bridge collapse," ABC 13 (Apr. 12, 2019) Accessed May 17, 2019. Available at: <https://www.13abc.com/content/news/Toledo-ATT-customers-without-reliable-phone-internet-service-after-Maumee-Avenue-bridge-collapse-508523811.html>
7. Communications Workers of America, "AT&T Jobs Report Update" (May 2019). Available at: <https://cwa-union.org/sites/default/files/20190508-cwa-att-jobs-report-update.pdf>.

CWA

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