

AT&T:
Abandoning Rural & Other
Communities in Wisconsin





AT&T is abandoning rural Wisconsin and many urban and suburban communities in the state. AT&T has a statutory obligation to ensure “reasonably adequate service and facilities” in the state.¹ Yet through systemic disrepair of its traditional landline network, many Wisconsin customers can no longer rely on AT&T to meet its statutory obligation to provide reliable telecommunications service.

In Wisconsin, AT&T has focused its resources on building its all-fiber network to select neighborhoods in Milwaukee and Madison.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. Every Wisconsin community needs access to quality wireline and wireless networks, including competitive choice among broadband providers.

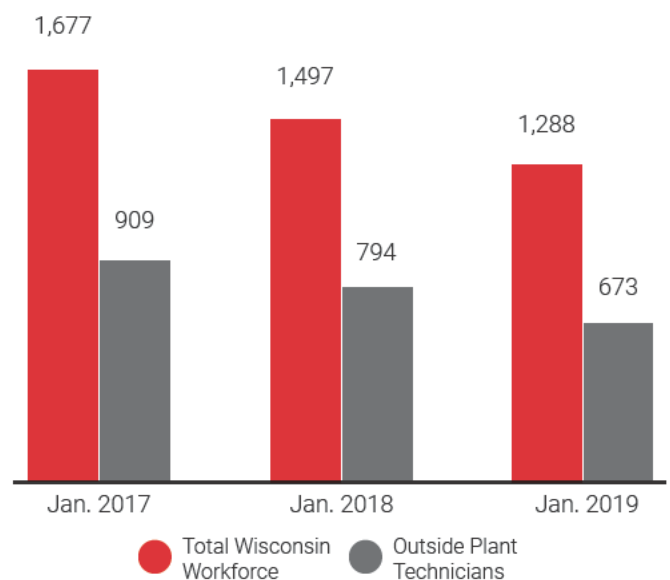
In many communities, AT&T voice service is a lifeline for customers. Wireless service is spotty and more expensive than wireline. Wireless service also depends on well-maintained wireline networks. In many suburban and urban neighborhoods in Wisconsin, AT&T has not upgraded its traditional copper network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

- Between Jan. 2017 and Jan. 2019, AT&T reduced its outside plant technicians in Wisconsin by 26 percent, dropping from 909 technicians to just 673.
- Over the last two years, AT&T reduced its total Wisconsin wireline workforce – outside technicians, inside technicians, call center workers, and administrative staff – by 23 percent, from 1,677 to 1,288 workers across the state.
- AT&T reduced its Wisconsin call center workforce by 21 percent in the last two years.

In the Last Two Years, AT&T Cut its Wisconsin Workforce by 23%



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 neighborhoods is in disrepair.

In Wisconsin 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 plant. These bags are designed to provide a short-term solution to damaged cable and equipment. 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 Wisconsin. In the course of its investigation, CWA uncovered numerous instances of facilities throughout Wisconsin 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.

Wisconsin deregulated public oversight of the telecommunications industry following a request from then-Governor Scott Walker with the passage of Senate Bill 13 in 2011.⁴ 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 indicates, eliminating public oversight and relying solely on competition has failed to ensure that AT&T meets its statutory obligation to provide adequate service and facilities to everyone in Wisconsin.

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 modern 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 rural plant. These workers discussed AT&T's rigid project timekeeping system that prevents them from taking the time to do a thorough 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.

AT&T's failure to invest in its landline network in Wisconsin 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.⁵

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

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

AT&T Copper Plant Photos – Wisconsin

1. This photo from West 12th Street, Fond Du Lac, WI, shows a severely damaged splice case. The splice's protective case is hanging open, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, birds are nesting inside the terminal, leading to further wire damage.



2. This photo from South Division Street, Port Washington, WI, 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.



3. This photo from County Road, Neenah, WI, 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.



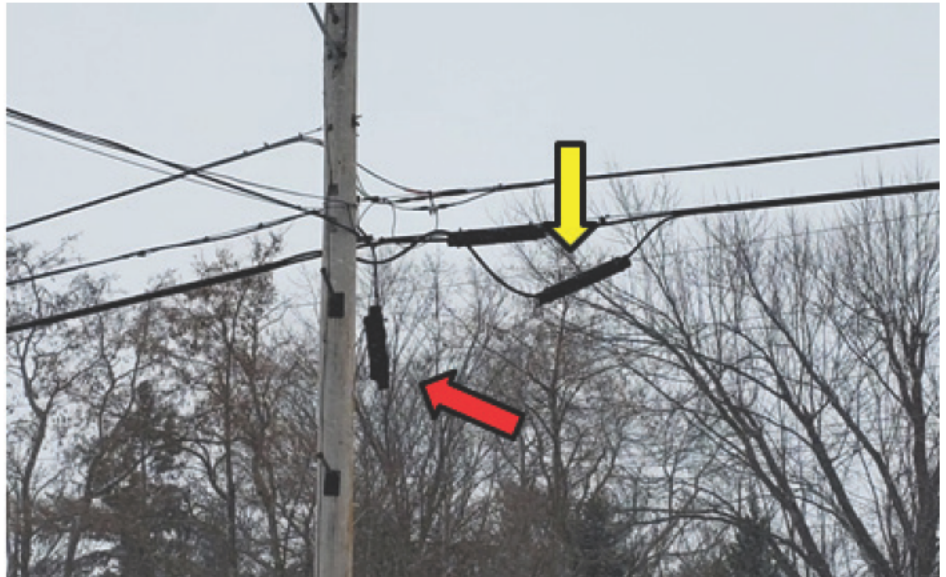
4. This photo from Old Plank Road, DePeere, WI, shows a damaged pedestal. Its protective cover is damaged (yellow arrow), leaving wires exposed to damage from weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, the exposed wires are a public safety hazard.



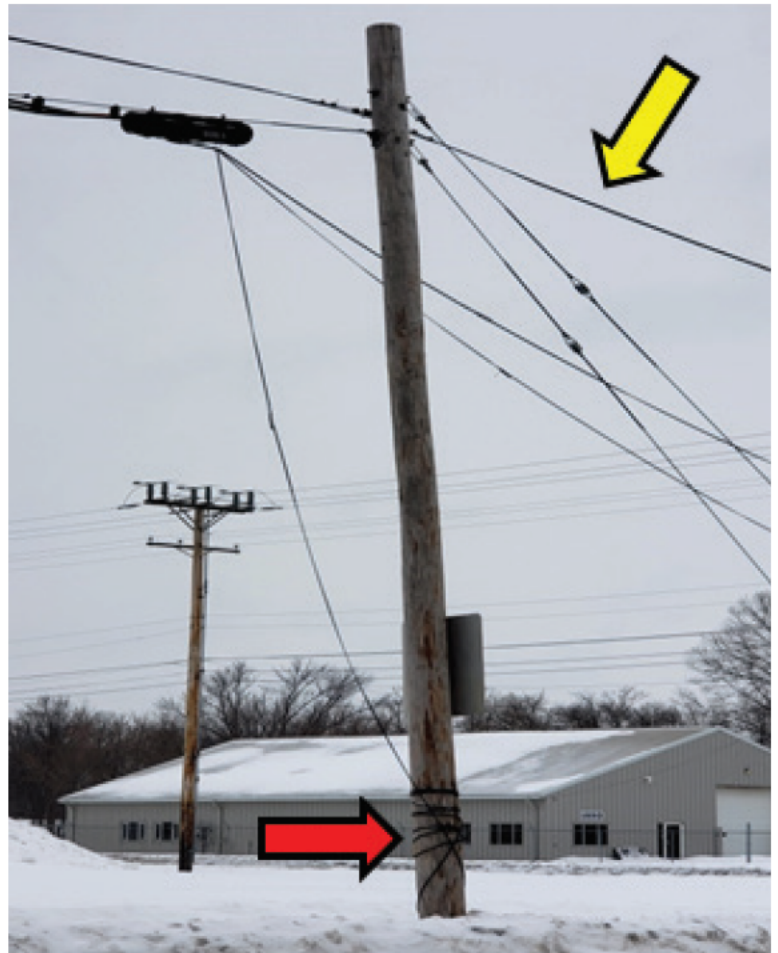
5. This photo from North Westhill Boulevard, Appleton, WI, shows a damaged pedestal. Its protective cover is missing, partially replaced with an orange plastic covering. This plastic covering will fall off or deteriorate over time, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, the exposed wires are a public safety hazard.



6. This photo from West Main Street, Hortonville, WI, shows a damaged splice terminal and unsecured cable. Splice terminals should be secured to cable, not left hanging (red arrow). And cable should be secured to the utility pole (yellow arrow). The wind blows the unsecured service cable, damaging the copper inside the wire and causing service issues.



7. This photo from Spencer Street, Appleton, WI, shows unsecured cables. The cables are meant to be secured to the utility pole, not merely taped to the pole with electrical tape (yellow arrow), or secured to a lash (red arrow). 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.



8. This photo from Mayflower Road, Greenville, WI, shows a damaged pedestal. Its protective cover is missing, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, the exposed wires are a public safety hazard.



9. This photo from County Road, East Freedom, WI, shows a severely damaged splice case. The splice's protective case is hanging open, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



10. This photo from Rexford Road, Shiocton, WI, shows a damaged pedestal. Its protective cover is missing, replaced with a black plastic covering. This plastic covering will fall off or deteriorate over time, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, the exposed wires are a public safety hazard.



11. This photo from Clancy Road, Greenleaf, WI, shows a damaged pedestal. Its protective cover is missing, replaced with an orange plastic covering. This plastic covering will fall off or deteriorate over time, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, the exposed wires are a public safety hazard.



12. This photo from Clancy Road, Greenleaf, WI, shows an unsecured hanging terminal. The terminal should be secured to the utility pole. The terminal can fill with water, deteriorating wires and leading to service issues. In addition, a hanging terminal presents a public safety hazard.



13. This photo from High Street, Wrightstown, WI, shows a double-pole. The old pole (left) has only AT&T equipment attached to it. 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, potentially leading to service and safety concerns.



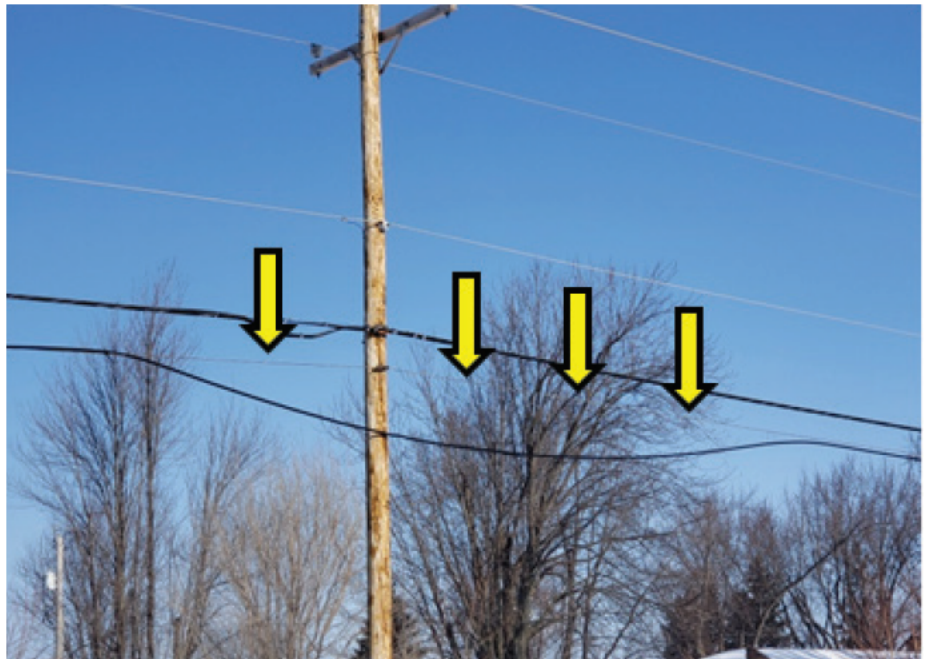
14. This photo from Helsan Drive, Richfield, WI, shows a damaged pedestal on its side. Ice and snow have covered the pedestal. Water will enter the pedestal and damage internal wires. Damaged wires cause service outages.



15. This photo from North 37th Street, Milwaukee, WI, 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.



16. This photo from County Road, East Freedom, WI, shows an unsecured cable. The cable should be secured to the lash (yellow arrows) and the utility pole. The wind blows the unsecured cable, damaging the copper inside the wire, causing service issues, and straining the properly lashed cable.



17. This photo from Green Bay Road, Neenah, WI, shows a double-pole. The old pole (right) has only AT&T equipment attached to it. 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.



18. This photo from Plainview Drive, Oshkosh, WI, shows a damaged pedestal. Its protective cover is missing, replaced with an orange plastic covering. This plastic covering will fall off or deteriorate over time, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, the exposed wires are a public safety hazard.



19. This photo from West Spencer Street, Appleton, WI, shows a rotting pole. AT&T's equipment is the only equipment that remains. 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.



20. This photo from County Road, Neenah, WI, shows a damaged pedestal. Its protective cover is damaged, taped shut with electrical tape. Electrical tape is not designed to do this. It will deteriorate over time, leaving wires exposed to damage from weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, the exposed wires are a public safety hazard.



21. This photo from State Road, Hortonville, WI, shows two damaged splices wrapped in orange plastic coverings. Once the wrap deteriorates, wires are exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages.



22. This photo from Breezewood Lane, Neenah, WI, 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.



23. This photo from West Wisconsin Avenue, Appleton, WI, shows a damaged pedestal. Its protective cover is unsecured. Wires are exposed to damage from weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, the exposed wires are a public safety hazard.



24. This photo from Greenville Drive, Greenville, WI, shows a damaged pedestal. Its protective cover is missing. Wires are exposed to damage from weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, the exposed wires are a public safety hazard.



25. This photo from Shanty Road, Wrightstown, WI, shows a damaged pedestal. Its protective cover is missing, partially replaced with an orange plastic covering. This plastic covering will fall off or deteriorate over time, leaving wires exposed to weather and animals. Damaged wires cause service outages. In addition, the exposed wires are a public safety hazard.



26. This photo from East Glendale Avenue, Appleton, WI, shows a double-pole. The old pole (left) has only AT&T equipment attached to it. 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 to the nearby road.



Endnotes

1. § 196.03(1).
2. According to AT&T, it is also building fiber in the following Wisconsin locations: Fitchburg, Oconomowoc, Wauwatosa, and West Allis. 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. The full text of Senate Bill 13 is available at: https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2011/related/proposals/jr1_sb13.pdf.
5. 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>.

