

FCC to launch investigation of CenturyLink following US-wide 911 outage

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Beginning in the early morning Thursday, December 27 and continuing throughout Saturday evening, hundreds of thousands of people were unable to reach 911 emergency phone services in the United States.

CenturyLink, the third largest telecommunications company operating in the US, behind AT&T and Verizon, respectively, admitted its phone and internet services were experiencing technical difficulties, but had hoped to have recovered within “a few hours.” After a few hours passed and services remained down into Friday morning, CenturyLink acknowledged the problem was more widespread and would take additional time to fix. This prompted Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Ajit Pai to announce an investigation into CenturyLink for its role in the outage.

Emergency phone service outages, ATM disconnections, and disrupted internet service was reported in multiple states, including Texas, California, Oregon, Colorado, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Missouri, Arizona and Massachusetts.

Chairman Pai, a former Verizon lawyer, Obama appointee, and erstwhile advocate of “free market” solutions and staunch opponent of “net neutrality,” released a statement on Friday in which he called the outage “completely unacceptable.” CenturyLink has yet to release a public statement as to the cause of the outage. On Friday, CenturyLink spokesperson Nikki Wheeler advised people unable to reach 911 on their landline to “...use their wireless phones to call 911 or drive to their nearest fire station or emergency facility.”

Brian Krebs, a former *Washington Post* reporter, tweeted Saturday morning a statement released by CenturyLink that was only sent to “core customers.” In the statement CenturyLink blamed their extended outage on a faulty network management card in

Denver, Colorado that was “propagating invalid frame packets across devices.” The release didn’t specify how one card could have negatively impacted so much of the network across multiple systems and states. CenturyLink acknowledged in the letter that engineer teams had to be dispatched to Atlanta, Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles and New Orleans to reset equipment on site that had been affected.

While service has now been restored it is unclear how many people were affected by the multi-state network outage and if any lives were lost as people were unable to access emergency services. Banner Health Services, which operates 28 hospitals, and utilizes CenturyLink and Verizon networks, reported that four of its hospitals had internment phone and internet connections. The North Colorado Medical Center, located in Greeley, seemed to have suffered the worst of it, with internet and phone outages that lasted for 24 hours, leaving doctors and nurses unable to access patients’ electronic medical records.

Meanwhile, in Boston a man was forced to use one of the city’s 176-year-old street-side boxes to report a building fire after he was unable to reach emergency services on his cellphone. The fire box system was built in 1852 using copper wires to transmit in Morse code to the fire department. The firefighters were able to respond before any injuries occurred. However, as Boston Fire spokesman Brian Sanders told NBC News, “It was a small fire that we were able to put out, but it could have been much worse.”

As America’s infrastructure continues to deteriorate, these dangerous outages are becoming more common. The FCC concluded a similar investigation into AT&T last year for two nationwide emergency service outages that occurred in March and May 2017. The two blackout incidents lasted for approximately six hours

and resulted in 15,200 failed 911 calls. AT&T, which had an operating revenue of \$190 billion in 2017, paid a paltry \$5.25 million dollar fine at the conclusion of the investigation. Meanwhile, according to opensecrets.org, AT&T spent over \$7 million dollars that same year contributing to political campaigns, including the Republican and Democratic party, with outgoing Texas Congressman Beto O'Rourke receiving \$126,204 dollars from the company, the most of any candidate.

Notably, CenturyLink was recently fined by the FCC for an emergency service outage in April 2014 that left 11 million people in six states without 911 service. The FCC statement estimated that 6,600 911 calls were left unanswered for over six hours as the network was down. CenturyLink was forced to pay a \$16 million dollar settlement and agreed to a compliance plan to prevent future outages from occurring. As for the latest outage and pending FCC investigation, it seems to have had little effect on CenturyLink shareholders; at the close of the stock market on Friday, CenturyLink's stock price remained unchanged.

The latest CenturyLink outage is another objective example that despite petty fines from a complicit government and assurances from corporate public relations departments these reckless incidents will continue to occur, leaving people without access to emergency help at precisely the time they need it most. Telling people to “drive themselves” to the hospital while suffering from a medical emergency is as absurd as it is dangerous.

The irrationality of the capitalist system expresses itself in all of facets of society and imperils humanity needlessly. Only through the working class consciously taking ownership of public utilities, including telephone and fiber lines, can they be operated for the benefit of all, instead of private profit.



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