

My name is William P. Shea, and I am the Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection, Division of Emergency Management and Homeland Security. In the wake of Tropical Storm Irene and the October Nor'Easter (also known as Storm Alfred) in 2011, the Two Storm Panel Report recommended that "state regulatory bodies should review telecommunications services currently in place to verify that the vendors have sufficient generator and backhaul capacity to meet the emergency needs of consumers and businesses." Report of the Two Storm Panel, Recommendation 18, p.12. Public Act 12-148 put this recommendation into effect. Telecommunications in the aftermath of storms perform a critical life safety function, and the loss of communications capabilities is not only frightening, it can be life threatening. In the wake of our historic October snowstorm, information provided to the State Emergency Operations Center indicated that more than 1000 cell towers were out of service across the state. This meant that over 35% of all cell sites were out. In some counties, over 50% of cell towers were not functioning. As the power outages continued, telecommunications providers experienced degrading capabilities.

Telecommunications providers must have sufficient in-state resources to coordinate and address such service failures. It is essential that their emergency planning provide for adequate coverage and resiliency, including pre-storm deployment of sufficient back-up power generation to run cell site towers and antennas, in the absence of conventional power sources for an extended period of time. There must be sufficient generator power to support communications among first responders and other essential government personnel including emergency management officials and support team members, and the public. Telecommunications providers should have redundancies in place similar to those used by power companies to maintain their services. These back-up systems must be inspected, repaired, and exercised on a regular basis. It is imperative that telecommunications providers reach out to the communities in which towers and antennas are located to establish planning and response partnerships in order to gain access to and maintain these sites during emergencies.

Ideally, telecommunications companies will address these issues voluntarily and in the spirit of public service, without the need for a statutory or regulatory requirement. If not, however, DEMHS will work with the Council to see if legislation/and or regulations at the state or federal level are needed to accomplish this emergency preparedness priority.