



Telephone communications when the power goes out

by Bryan Smith, LTCL Tech Coach

Today's topic comes from a library patron during the recent record-breaking weather and resulting power outages. It's a great topic and one that you might have had to learn recently. Here are my thoughts on ways to prepare as well as actions to take when we lose electric power for an extended period.

I remember growing up when storms would knock down some power line, but we could still pick up the phone and make a call to see if others also lost power. This was possible because Plain Old Telephone Service (POTS) was driven by two copper wires and the phone company provided a low voltage current over the lines. So, only if the phone company lost power, would you not be able to make a call. Most phone companies had large battery backups, so I never experienced a phone outage when there were power outages.

POTS lines are a rarity these days as all those tiny analog copper wires have been replaced by digital cables or fiber-optic cables that can transmit lots of data, including digitized signals of your voice in the case of a phone call. So, if your home telephone service, aka landline service, is provided by a carrier, like AT&T U-Verse or Spectrum, then your phone calls are reliant on the modem which needs electricity. Thankfully, most modems have an internal battery backup, so you can still make phone calls when the power is out... for as long as the battery lasts (around four hours). External battery backups are also available which provide for longer outages.

So, maybe you're covered now – no problems, right? Not so fast. Let's take a look at the landline telephones you have in your home. Chances are good that you use cordless phones. Well... the base station also needs electricity – no electricity, no telephone. This is why if you have landline home phone service I strongly suggest that you have at least one corded telephone that does not require electricity.

Cell phones get around almost all of these limitations that landline phones have, and maybe you were able to continue to communicate if you lost power recently. There are two concerns for cell phones in a power outage.

The first concern is that the cell towers that your cell phone is connecting to has power. The good news is that cell towers also have battery backups. The bad news is that they only provide between two and four hours of power depending on call volume. Some towers have diesel, LP, or natural gas generators to provide for 24-48 hours of power.

The second is the battery in your cell phone. Portable chargers are a great tool to have in a power outage as they can charge your cell phone. They are available for around \$60 and they can charge cell phones many times. Don't forget to charge your portable charger – some people leave theirs plugged in all the time. Another way to charge your cell phone is from a laptop computer. You're simply transferring the power from the (charged) laptop's batteries to your cell phone. And yet another way to charge your cell phone is from a USB port in your vehicle.

Smart cell phones can truly be lifesavers during long power outages as they can also help you access news, weather, and services like the [City of Lakeway's website](#) which lists the three water service providers as well as a [water service area map](#) for Lakeway. It also lists the two electric service providers and an [electrical service area map](#).

I hope you can always stay in touch during power outages.

Tech Coach Assistance

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