

Meltdown zaps internet, phones

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A steam pipe that broke under a street in downtown Duluth was the cause of damage to a fiber-optic line that cut phone and internet service to thousands along the North Shore Tuesday. Qwest Communications crews worked all along Second Street into the evening and service began coming back online about 10 p.m., Qwest spokeswoman Joanna Hjelmeland said.

Service, including that for cell phones, was cut for about 12 hours and affected customers from Two Harbors to Grand Portage.

In essence, most of the North Shore had no way to easily communicate with the outside world from midday to midnight.

"It was a complicated fix," Hjelmeland said of workers going into the street through manholes to repair a "significant section" of fiber-optic line melted by the steam escaping from the broken pipe. She said the problem was part of the nature of the shared utilities under city streets.

The damaged line was exclusive to North Shore customers but, as fixes were made to the hundreds of connections within each fiber-optic line, part of east Duluth was cut off as well in the early evening. Service from Two Harbors and beyond was cut just before 11 a.m. Tuesday.

Frontier Communications, which runs some of its traffic through the Qwest line, reported about 4,000 of its customers in the same coverage areas were also affected.

Residents along the Shore were able to dial within their own three-digit local exchanges and emergency calls were routed through St. Louis County, which was using police radio channels for contact back into the outage area.

Emergency dispatch operations from Grand Portage to Two Harbors scrambled Tuesday afternoon to reroute the 911 service. Lake County had people at fire and ambulance stations in case someone came by with an emergency. They also answered alternate 911 phone lines.

In remote places like Finland, ham radio operators were being used to make contact with the dispatch center in Two Harbors.