

<https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/vermont/2019/01/24/vermont-cell-phone-coverage-maps-dead-zone-verizon-att/2467205002/>

## VT officials suspected cellphone coverage maps were too good to be true. They were right.

[April McCullum](#), Burlington Free Press Published 7:00 a.m. ET Jan. 24, 2019



Sean Hood of Burlington checks his cell phone on the Church Street Marketplace in Burlington in 2016. (Photo: ZACH DESPART/FREE PRESS)

Cell carriers [claim](#) that you should be able to stream online video on your cellphone almost anywhere in Vermont.

But in some places in the state, it's not even possible to make a phone call.

A Vermont Department of Public Service official spent about six weeks last fall proving that point to the federal government. Corey Chase, the department's telecommunications infrastructure specialist, drove around Vermont with six cellphones, each connected to a different carrier.

The phones were constantly trying to download a massive file full of images from the Hubble space telescope, and Chase used an app to collect data on their progress.

The result is the first [independent map of Vermont cell service](#) that's rooted in experience (A previous effort by a state contractor used computer models to create maps of likely coverage). The new map shows that cell carriers have overstated their coverage in large swaths of Vermont.

"It's pretty different — actual experience versus modeled experience," Chase said.

Representatives from Verizon, AT&T and an industry group that represents cell carriers did not immediately respond to requests for comment Wednesday.

Verizon is the top cell phone provider in Vermont, serving about 47.5 percent of cell phone users, according to a [state-commissioned survey of Vermonters](#) conducted in October and November 2017. AT&T follows with 31.8 percent of the market.

## Is this the worst place for cell service in Chittenden County?

The [new map](#) shows that even Vermont's most populous county has dead zones.

A stretch of Vermont 128 in Westford, from the Essex town line to the Westford town center, had the worst service in all of the Chittenden County tests. In this area — including the road just behind the Westford School — you'll be lucky to be able to make a phone call with any carrier.

"Why there's no service is really a question for the providers," Chase said. "I can tell you generally, providers build towers and direct their service to areas where they believe their customers demand service."



Principal Marcie Lewis greets students at the Westford Elementary School in May 2015. (Photo: GLENN RUSSELL/FREE PRESS)

AT&T and Verizon claim to cover the entire stretch, according to maps submitted to the FCC. T Mobile, VTel and Sprint say they cover parts of that area of Westford.

## Vermont's goal: Make more areas eligible for FCC grants

Vermont created the new cell coverage map in an attempt to make more areas of the state eligible for grants from the Federal Communications Commission.

The FCC's initial maps, based on information from the carriers, showed that about 5 percent of the state would be [eligible for cell carriers to apply for federal grants to improve service](#). Those were the areas where no company claimed to offer service of at least 5 Mbps or better.

The Department of Public Service decided to challenge the information that cell carriers had submitted to the FCC.

Vermont's new data from the drive test helped the state to successfully challenge the FCC maps in some areas.

People in 36 other states also submitted challenges, and the FCC [announced in December](#) that the agency was investigating whether "one or more major carriers" submitted inaccurate coverage maps.

"A preliminary review of speed test data submitted through the challenge process suggested significant violations of the Commission's rules," FCC Chairman Ajit Pai wrote in the [Dec. 7 statement](#). "That's why I've ordered an investigation into these matters. We must ensure that the data is accurate before we can proceed."

## Call for stories: How's your cell service, Vermont?

The Burlington Free Press is interested in hearing from Vermonters about how lack of cell service affects their lives.

Email comments to reporter April McCullum at [amccullum@freepressmedia.com](mailto:amccullum@freepressmedia.com) or call 802-660-1863. Comments may be used in future coverage.

*Contact April McCullum at 802-660-1863 or [amccullum@freepressmedia.com](mailto:amccullum@freepressmedia.com). Follow her on Twitter at [@April\\_McCullum](#).*