

# Maryland Office of People's Counsel

## Verizon Telephone Service Copper to Fiber Transition: What Maryland Consumers Need to Know



The Maryland Office of People's Counsel (OPC) has become aware that Verizon is contacting traditional copper line telephone service subscribers by mail and/or telephone to inform them their copper line telephone service will soon be discontinued. Verizon also informs subscribers that they must switch to Verizon's fiber network if they wish to continue to receive voice service from Verizon. Maryland OPC understands that Verizon's notices assert an implementation date of either December 14, 2016 or September, 2017 (or both), and that these notices are being sent to homes in Bethesda, Columbia, Glen Burnie, Rockville and Towson, Maryland.

### Is Verizon allowed to discontinue my copper phone service?

While new federal regulations from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) do allow the nation's telephone providers to replace copper telephone services with fiber telephone services under certain conditions, OPC believes that Verizon's copper telephone retirement date of December 2016 may not comport with federal law. The September 2017 date, on the other hand, may comport with federal law. OPC also believes that Verizon's notices do not provide clear enough information to consumers. OPC has asked both the FCC and the Maryland Public Service Commission (PSC) to suspend Verizon's copper retirement notices pending further investigation.

Even if a regulatory agency decides that Verizon cannot retire copper services in Maryland until a later date, it is likely that you may have to transition from copper voice at some point in the next year.

## **If I received a notice that my service will be suspended in or around December 2016, what should I do?**

Unless a regulatory agency suspends Verizon's December 2016 notice, you may need to take action. At this time your choices are to a) switch to Verizon's fiber network, which is regulated, b) switch to Verizon's FiOS® services for voice and/or TV and/or Internet, which is unregulated, c) let your landline services lapse altogether and rely on wireless voice, or d) try to find another provider for voice service. You can also contact the Maryland Public Service Commission and/or the FCC, as listed below.

## **If you switch to Verizon's fiber voice, here are some things to keep in mind.**

- Some features and functionalities on the copper network may differ on the fiber network. The current calling plan and price you pay for your telephone service will not change when you switch to fiber based telephone service, until you decide to change it.
- Read Verizon's notices and website very carefully to make sure you know exactly what type of service you are getting and how it is different from your traditional copper voice phone service. Take detailed notes of telephone calls with any Verizon representatives.
- Since fiber voice services do not work in a power outage, inquire about the functionality, care and maintenance of back-up battery options, and the cost of purchasing replacement batteries.
- Inform Verizon if you have any home monitoring equipment such as medical equipment that relies upon your existing phone line to ensure that it will continue to work after you make the switch. You may also inquire how the devices would work in the event of a power outage.
- While the terms fiber and FiOS® are used interchangeably at times, they are not the same. If you switch your existing copper service to a fiber-optic based service without changing your rate plan or calling features, your new service will continue to be subject to Maryland Public Service Commission regulation, and will come with certain consumer protections.
- FiOS® Digital Voice is an unregulated service, and is an optional alternative to traditional telephone service to which the Commission's consumer protection rules do not apply. Make sure you verify with Verizon whether you are switching to regulated or unregulated voice.
- Verizon's wireless (cell phone) service also is not regulated by the PSC.
- If you currently have DSL for High Speed Internet and want to remain a Verizon customer, Verizon will require you to purchase FiOS® High Speed Internet service, as DSL is only available over the copper network. Or, you may want to shop for high speed Internet service options.
- Verizon's FiOS® television and Internet services, which may be bundled with voice, are not regulated by the Maryland Public Service Commission.

- If you switch to Verizon's fiber services, review your monthly bill after your telephone service has been migrated to fiber to ensure that the billing reflects the appropriate plan and price that you paid previously and no other changes have occurred without your permission.

### **Q: If Verizon tells me that I must switch to fiber to continue to receive telephone service from Verizon, do I have to switch?**

Eventually, you will most likely have to switch, or find another provider. Keep in mind that (1) Verizon remains obligated to provide landline telephone service to all customers who request such service, and (2) regardless of whether Verizon provides telephone service over a copper or fiber network, the Maryland Public Service Commission has a duty to monitor Verizon's performance to ensure compliance with your consumer rights and protections, service quality, and public safety.

### **Q: What is the most significant difference between copper-based telephone service and fiber-based telephone service?**

A: The copper-based network is self-powered and will usually remain operational in the event of a power outage, while fiber service relies upon an optical network terminal (ONT), which must be connected to a power source or outlet at your home or business. If your power goes out, a backup battery connected to the ONT will provide you with backup power for a period of time. In the event of an electrical outage, most batteries will operate telephones up to 8 hours. Please verify with Verizon the type of backup batteries available as well as replacement options.

### **Q: Is Verizon FiOS® the same as the fiber service that I may be migrated to?**

A: No. While both fiber-based traditional phone service and FiOS® services are offered over Verizon's fiber-optic network, they are not the same. If you upgrade your existing copper service to a fiber-optic based service without changing your rate plan or calling features, your new service will continue to be subject to PSC regulation, and will come with certain consumer protections. FiOS® Digital Voice (FDV) is an unregulated service, to which the PSC's consumer protection rules do not apply.

### **Will my house be affected by copper network retirement?**

On September 15, 2016, Verizon filed a document with the FCC claiming that it is replacing its traditional copper network in certain communities in Maryland and migrating customers to a fiber network. According to Verizon's filing, it is planning to retire copper phone service in the following neighborhoods: Bethesda, Columbia, Glen Burnie, Rockville and Towson, Maryland.

Addresses (but not names) of individual customers are listed in Exhibit A of Verizon's Public Notice of Copper Retirement Under Rule 51.332, which is available at <https://ecfsapi.fcc.gov/file/10915042324588/9-15-16%20MD%20Copper%20Ret%20filing%202016-03-A-MD.pdf>.

OPC does not know if or when Verizon is planning to retire its copper service in other parts of Maryland that are served by its fiber network. Verizon cannot retire the copper service in those areas without authorization by the Maryland Public Service Commission and/or the FCC.

The parts of Maryland that are NOT served by Verizon's fiber network, such as Baltimore City, Western Maryland and the Eastern Shore, are not directly affected by these notices.

Verizon still has a legal duty to maintain its copper telephone services in areas where it has not deployed a fiber network and where it has not filed an intention to retire its copper services. Should you feel Verizon is failing at that duty, you may contact the Maryland Public Service Commission and/or the Maryland OPC at the addresses listed below.

### **For questions or complaints**

Maryland State Public Service Commission

William Donald Schaefer Tower  
6 St. Paul St., 16th Floor  
Baltimore, MD 21202  
(410) 767-8000  
MD Toll Free: 1-800-492-0474  
TTY Users call via Maryland Relay 1-800-201-7165  
<http://www.psc.state.md.us/online-complaints/>

Federal Communications Commission

445 12th Street SW  
Washington, DC 20554  
Phone: 1-888-225-5322  
TTY: 1-888-835-5322  
Videophone: 1-844-432-2275  
Fax: 1-866-418-0232  
<https://consumercomplaints.fcc.gov/hc/en-us>

**\*Use docket number WC-16-351 if you contact the FCC.\***

The Maryland Office of People's Counsel

6 St. Paul Street, Suite 2102  
Baltimore, Maryland 21202  
Toll Free: 1-800-207-4055  
Phone: (410) 767-8150  
TTY: Facsimile: (410) 333-3616  
Contact Us via Email: [DLInfo OPC@maryland.gov](mailto:DLInfo OPC@maryland.gov)

For more information, please see FCC Notice regarding communication transitions

<https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/tech-transitions-network-upgrades-may-affect-your-service>

Maryland Office of People's Counsel  
410-767-8150; 1-800-207-4055  
[www.opc.maryland.gov](http://www.opc.maryland.gov)  
November 2016  
Page 4