

# 'No internet, no work'

## Outages impact small businesses, workers at home

Days after Tropical Storm Isaias knocked out internet service to parts of Long Island, many business owners and residents said the ongoing lack of service was causing severe hardships.

"I can't process any credit cards, and about 90% of the business since COVID is all credit cards," said Steve Cohen, owner of Town Bagel, whose Plainview store was unable to take online orders or take credit-card payments due to its loss of internet service. Ordinarily, three-

fourths of its orders would be online, he said. Most customers were understanding, but a few left unhappy, he said.

One cash-strapped patron got a lucky break when she spotted her friend Larry Spielhold, 63, of Melville, at the bagel shop. Spielhold served as an impromptu ATM, advancing his friend \$20. "I don't normally have cash," said Spielhold, a marketer of window treatments.

Another lunch patron, Jack Young, 64, of Plainview said the power outage has brought his executive recruiting business to a standstill. "I haven't worked since Tuesday night," he said. "No internet, no work."

The loss of internet access is especially burdensome for businesses that rely on online payments and orders, and residents who work remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, said Kyle Strober, executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island, a real estate development lobbying group.

The association called on Friday for the state Department of Public Service to add Altice USA to its investigation into storm-related outages. The agency was ordered on Wednesday by Gov. Andrew Cuomo to investigate Verizon, PSEG Long Island and other companies, which Cuomo said did not "adequately prepare" for the storm and have failed to communicate well with customers.

A spokesman for the state agency, James Denn, said it will be "reviewing all major telecommunications providers on Long Island as part of our investigation."

A spokesman for Altice USA, which provides service under the Optimum and Altice brands, declined to comment on ABLI's demand for an investigation. Ashwin Bhandari declined to say how many customers lost internet access, but said the company is working to restore it: "Currently the majority of service issues experienced by customers

are related to commercial power outages and we are engaged with the utility companies to ensure service is restored as safely and quickly as possible."

Verizon spokesman David Weissman said, "We look forward to cooperating fully with the commission." He said less than 1% of its Fios customers had internet service affected, and he said workers "continue to make strong progress in our restoration efforts."

Those efforts provided little comfort to Long Islanders who still lacked online access.

Doreen Farber, 32, a stay-at-home mom who lives in North Massapequa with her husband, Michael Farber, 31, their 3-year-old daughter and Michael's elderly grandmother, said they have been "trying hard not to lose our sanity" while they wait for internet service and power to be restored.

Farber said her husband, who works in medical billing, hasn't been able to work since

Tuesday.

"It's added stress because now we're worried wondering whether he'll be paid for those days," she said. "We can't really afford so many days without pay, we're living paycheck to paycheck."

Huntington resident Elaine Gross, who is president of Erase Racism, said many Long Islanders were already suffering from inadequate internet access even before the storm, she said. "The equity issues are there without COVID, without a storm, so you know they're only exacerbated" by the latest hardships, she said.

At Duck Island Bread Company in Huntington, Robert Biancavilla, 66, said he averages about 150 to 200 digital orders a week, and his shop's point-of-sale system requires internet service.

"Nobody pays with cash anymore," he said. "Kids today, they don't even know how to make change."

This story was reported by **Daysi Calavia-Robertson, Maura McDermott, Sarina Trangle** and **Ken Schachter**. It was written by McDermott.

# Crowding at Penn raises LIRR riders' concerns

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Long Island Rail Road commuters' accounts of crowding at Penn Station during and after the agency's storm-related service suspension on Tuesday has raised new concerns about the LIRR's ability to maintain safe social distancing among passengers in an emergency.

But railroad officials say they're doing all they can to keep riders safe, including by requiring the use of face masks and by advancing several infrastructure projects that will reduce the frequency of major service disruptions and expand capacity at Penn Station.

LIRR spokeswoman Meredith Daniels defended the railroad's storm response — "a heroic feat," she said, that included "immediate and ongoing customer communication throughout the storm."

"Station and train conditions were thoroughly monitored to ensure customer and employee safety while hundreds of employees, in the field, worked to aggressively clear downed trees and repair equipment,"



Commuters at Penn Station on Wednesday afternoon.

Daniels said.

With fierce winds that reached nearly 80 miles per hour in parts of the railroad's territory, the LIRR suspended all train service at the height of the storm Tuesday afternoon, and did not fully restore it until early Thursday morning. The shutdown resulted in a steady

buildup of commuters waiting for the resumption of service at Penn Station.

"We knew this storm was coming for days, but now people stranded in Penn Station with no place to go. No shuttle busses. No social distancing. Nothing," Twitter user @TThe-moviejunkie posted shortly

after 5 p.m. on Tuesday.

Others shared photos of dozens of riders gathering near Penn's departure boards — despite having plenty of open space in the station.

With cancellations, delays and branch suspensions lasting through Wednesday, so did the congestion in parts of Penn Station. In one photo shared Wednesday on social media, dozens of commuters are packed shoulder-to-shoulder.

The cramped conditions in some areas of Penn came despite the railroad still carrying only about a quarter of its usual ridership, which has been decimated by the coronavirus pandemic. That's led some to further question the railroad's ability to promote social distancing once riders return in larger numbers, and another major service outage impacts Penn.

Gerard Bringmann, chairman of the LIRR Commuter Council — the railroad's state-regulated rider watchdog group — said the likelihood of Penn Station experiencing hourslong delays every few months is "invariable," and complicated by the fact that riders have fewer op-

tions than usual to pass the time.

"It's not like you can go upstairs or out on the street to a bar, because everything is closed," Bringmann said. "This whole thing is like a no-win situation. You want to get ridership back, because of the revenue. But as you get ridership back, there's less chance of social distancing."

Bringmann said riders' inability to keep a safe social distance makes it doubly important that they wear masks. He also urged the railroad to more closely consider track assignments, so as not to have too many riders on a platform at once.

Railroad officials noted that thanks to its LIRR Forward initiative, which addresses infrastructure issues at the root of service disruptions, such major services outages are more infrequent, even in severe weather.

In 2019, the railroad reported 2,868 delays lasting over 15 minutes, a 52% decrease from 2017 — the year before the LIRR Forward plan was enacted. Over the same period, train cancellations fell by 45%, from 1,376 in 2017 to 757 last year, according to LIRR statistics.