

Responding to calls for cell service in a storm

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The cellular network faltered following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and broke down yet again four years ago when a blackout blanketed the Northeast.

With Long Island at the height of the hurricane season and with weather experts saying the area is overdue for a major storm, cellular and land-line phone providers are once again providing assurances that their systems can handle what is to come.

Among the preparations: "cell on wheels," that is, antennae mounted on trucks to be moved into damaged areas; back-up generators to keep call-routing systems humming; and batteries to back up the back-up generators.

"9/11 and Katrina were unique circumstances," said Joe Farren,

spokesman for CTIA—The Wireless Association, which represents all sectors of the wireless industry. "Without question, the industry made changes, learned from, and looked at the hurricane season differently after Katrina."

In fact, wireless providers already are casting an eye toward Hurricane Dean, Farren said, and representatives from his association met late last week with federal authorities about the possibility of Dean striking the United States. If the powerful storm moves closer to the country, cell companies likely will start moving portable cell equipment, such as COWS —

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THE NEXT
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cell antennae on wheels — near the strike zone.

The goal, he said, is to have communications soon after a storm hits.

"We can't always anticipate what is going to happen," Farren said. "And if we don't have power, it's hard to have service."

After the 2003 blackout here, a flood of nervous callers overloaded the networks of some wireless carriers, and there wasn't enough capacity to handle the excess calls. Complicating matters, many cellular sites, which depend on electricity, had inadequate backup power.

In the years since the blackout, many more people have

gotten cell phones. In June 2006, there were 13.3 million wireless users in the state, compared with 8.8 million in June 2003 and 5 million in 2000, according to the Federal Communications Commission.

According to David Samberg, spokesman for the New York Metro region for Verizon wireless, the network remained intact during the blackout. Every cell site — that is, where the cell antennae are located — has a backup generator where the landlord will allow it, and in places where a generator is not allowed, battery backup is in place that can run the antennae for up to eight hours.

The core of the cellular network — switching stations that route the calls — have backup generators with enough fuel to run indefinitely and also are

powered by batteries to ensure that power is never cut off.

Some calls may be blocked if too many callers swamp the system; Farren recommended that callers learn how to text-message, which takes up less bandwidth.

Land-lines proved resilient in the blackout and also during the last major storm that hit Long Island. When Hurricane Gloria struck the Island in 1985, about 44,000 customers lost telephone service. The then-New York Telephone Company, with 1.2 million customers on Long Island, had been burying its cable and lines, according to news reports at the time.

A Verizon spokeswoman said some of its lines are buried and some are above ground.

Changes in the industry — with cable providers entering

the telephone business — also make it more likely that more phone lines are in the air, vulnerable to storm winds. Five years ago, Cablevision started offering phone service, and it now serves more than 1.3 million phone customers in the New York metro area, including Long Island.

The company said it has a storm response plan that includes placing crews on alert and using satellite phones to communicate with them.

"Cablevision constantly monitors weather forecasts in order to be prepared for major weather events and created a task force that spent more than a year reviewing our operations as part of a comprehensive hurricane preparedness plan to ensure that we are prepared for a major weather event, like a hurricane," read a statement from the company.