

LAWSUIT: 250 CHICAGO-AREA SCHOOLS, LIBRARIES TO LOSE AFFORDABLE INTERNET ACCESS, CHICAGO TRIBUNE

By Meg Graham
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More than 250 Chicago-area schools, libraries and nonprofit organizations will lose affordable Internet access in early November, according to a lawsuit filed this month against Sprint.

Mobile Citizen and Mobile Beacon, national nonprofit organizations that sell \$10-a-month broadband service to schools and nonprofit organizations, filed the suit in a Massachusetts state court on Oct. 14, less than a month before Sprint planned to shut down its WiMax network in favor of LTE.

The organizations say they provide unlimited broadband service using WiMax to a combined 429 schools, 61 libraries and 1,820 nonprofits in the U.S.

Plaintiffs include Chicago Instructional Technology Foundation and other nonprofit organizations that hold Educational Broadband Service licenses through the Federal Communications Commission. Defendants include Sprint and Clearwire, a telecommunications operator that Sprint now owns.

Mobile Citizen and Mobile Beacon are Educational Broadband Service providers that leased part of their FCC-allotted spectrum to Clearwire in 2006. In return, the organizations say, Clearwire was obligated to offer unlimited high-speed broadband access via the WiMax network.

Sprint brought Clearwire in 2013 and later announced that it would shut down its WiMax network by Nov. 6.

The organizations say Sprint has “made it impossible” to migrate their clients to the LTE network because of complications delivering and setting up infrastructure to get clients on LTE and because the provider will be throttling service — meaning it will slow down service considerably after a client device has used 6 gigabytes of data.

That's roughly twice the download size of a high-definition movie. Mobile Citizen's clients use an average of 40 GB per month, the suit says.

Sprint says the organizations have had ample time to transition clients onto the LTE network and has said it doesn't offer an “unlimited data-only service plan to our retail customers.”

“This is a contract dispute,” a Sprint spokeswoman told Blue Sky in an email. “Simply put, the reality of this situation is that Sprint is bringing more advanced, higher quality broadband service to market, not turn it off. Sprint has gone to great lengths to work with all WiMAX users to transition WiMAX accounts to LTE, for the express purpose of improving the consumer broadband experience, not shutting it off. And we have been very successful at transitioning the majority of these accounts. But the transition cannot take place without the cooperation of each licensee.”

The situation has left Chicago-area organizations in the dark about Internet access. Mobile Citizen and Mobile Beacon said they've run into trouble receiving devices that would enable clients to access LTE.

"The majority of our customers are set to lose service on Nov. 6," said Kristen Perry, communications director of Voqal, which runs Mobile Citizen. Perry said she was referring to customers of Mobile Citizen and Mobile Beacon.

Christopher Hardesty, technology coordinator at Lincoln Park High School, said Sprint's switch to LTE will render the service "less viable" for many teachers at the school. Hardesty said the school uses Mobile Citizen to provide affordable Internet access for teachers, allowing them to prepare lessons at home without using their personal data plans.

Mobile Beacon's services power Brookfield Public Library's hotspot lending program, which allows those without home Internet access to check out laptops, tablets and mobile hotspots. Frank Murray, the library's head of reference and electronic systems, said patrons use the service for job searches, homework help and general Internet use.

Clarence Hogan, who runs after-school programs in underserved communities for Chicago middle- and high-schoolers, said he would have to switch to a much higher-cost service to offer the kinds of digital storytelling and programming he currently offers through Living 2 Learn.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he said. "Maybe some kind of miracle will happen."

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