

United States Senate

June 18, 2025

Mr. Hans Vestberg
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Verizon Communications Inc.
1095 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10036

Dear Mr. Vestberg:

Recent findings from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and reporting from *The Wall Street Journal* show that Verizon's workforce has been exposed to dangerous levels of lead from legacy lead-sheathed telecommunications cables. According to these reports, Verizon workers have been subjected to lead contamination on the job, in some cases at dangerous levels. The health and safety of your employees must be Verizon's top priority, and these findings require immediate and decisive corporate action.

It is Verizon's responsibility—both moral and legal—to safeguard the well-being of its workers and the communities in which it operates. The exposure of telecom workers in Massachusetts to lead-laced environments, including manholes where sediment contained lead concentrations as high as 30,000 parts per million—150 times the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) current safety limit—demands the highest level of attention from Verizon. Verizon must act swiftly to eliminate lead exposure from its operations, remediate affected environments, and commit to full transparency and accountability moving forward.

As highlighted in an extensive *Wall Street Journal* investigation, telecommunications companies—including Verizon—have for decades left behind a sprawling nationwide network of lead-sheathed cables in the ground, underwater, and overhead.¹ These cables, originally installed in the 19th and 20th centuries, are now deteriorating and leaching lead into surrounding soil, water, and air. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that lead levels at dozens of sites tested across the country exceeded EPA safety guidelines, and in many cases, companies have long known

¹ Susan Pulliam et al., *America is Wrapped in Miles of Toxic Lead Cables*, WALL ST. J. (July 9, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/lead-cables-telecoms-att-toxic-5b34408b>.

about the potential risks to workers and the environment. Yet meaningful remediation efforts have been absent.

This legacy infrastructure is not a historical artifact—it is an active hazard to the health of today’s workers and residents, especially in environmental justice communities already burdened by systemic inequities. The failure to adequately warn, monitor, or act in the face of known risks is a breach of public trust and a potential violation of workplace safety laws.

When the *Wall Street Journal* story broke in July 2023, I wrote to the telecommunications industry’s trade association, USTelecom, demanding information about the location, condition, and risk management of lead-covered cables, emphasizing that these companies “must act swiftly and responsibly to ensure the mitigation of any environmental and public health effects.”² In April 2024, I hosted a public roundtable in Chicopee, Massachusetts, where I was joined by state and local officials, occupational health experts, and union representatives.³ The roundtable exposed the shocking extent of lead contamination in communities such as Springfield, Holyoke, and Chicopee, where soil samples beneath aging phone lines tested positive for dangerously high lead concentrations. This issue has been extensively documented by experts from Boston University, New York University, the EPA, and the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts.⁴

Most recently, NIOSH completed a Health Hazard Evaluation confirming serious occupational exposures among Verizon workers in Massachusetts; we understand a copy of the final report has been provided to Verizon. NIOSH found that these workers were repeatedly exposed to lead because inadequate safety procedures in place failed to protect them. NIOSH also reviewed past blood level testing by workers, which found examples of workers with elevated blood lead levels according to federal safety guidelines; this suggests recent worker exposure at unsafe levels of lead. Additionally, NIOSH hygienists found lead on workers hands, boots, and in their trucks, suggesting many may be unknowingly carrying home a substance that could endanger their families. Children are particularly sensitive to lead, with even low levels of exposure resulting in developmental delays, difficulty learning, and behavioral issues.⁵

² Letter from Senator Edward J. Markey to Jonathan Spalter, President and CEO, USTelecom (July 11, 2023), https://www.markey.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/ejm_letter_to_ustelecom_re_lead_phone_lines_-_071023pdf.pdf; Press Release, Office of Senator Edward J. Markey, Senator Markey Demands Answers from Telecom Industry Following Reports of Lead Contamination from Aging Infrastructure (July 12, 2023), <https://www.markey.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senator-markey-demands-answers-from-telecom-industry-following-reports-of-lead-contamination-from-aging-infrastructure>.

³ Press Release, Office of Senator Edward J. Markey, ICYMI: Senator Markey Hosts Roundtable in Western Massachusetts on Threat of Lead Contamination from Degrading Telecommunications Cables, Finds Unsafe Levels of Lead After Testing Cables Today in Chicopee (Feb. 5, 2024), <https://www.markey.senate.gov/news/press-releases/icymi-senator-markey-hosts-roundtable-in-western-massachusetts-on-threat-of-lead-contamination-from-degrading-telecommunications-cables-finds-unsafe-levels-of-lead-after-testing-cables-today-in-chicopee>.

⁴ See, e.g., Jack Caravanos et al., *Measurement of Soil Lead Levels Adjacent to Lead-Sheathed Communications Cables*, Environmental Health Perspectives (Mar. 11, 2024), <https://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/doi/10.1289/EHP14086>.

⁵ About Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention, CDC (Mar. 13, 2025), <https://www.cdc.gov/lead-prevention/about/index.html#:~:text=Causes,Certain%20jobs%20and%20hobbies>.

Key findings from the NIOSH report include:

- One bulk sediment sample from the bottom of a manhole where Verizon line technicians work contained 30,000 parts per million (ppm) of lead. In January 2024, the EPA lowered its acceptable level of lead in soil from 400 ppm to 200 ppm.⁶
- One personal air sample—air collected from the breathing zone of an individual worker—showed amounts of lead that exceeded the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) action level of 30 micrograms per cubic meter.
- All sampled workers had measurable lead on their hands *after* routine hand hygiene.
- Lead was detected on surfaces in work vehicles, tools, equipment, and common garage areas.
- Between the first and second site visit, Verizon acquired and was in the process of introducing the use of lead removal wipes instead of wet wipes.
- Some employees had blood lead levels above public health reference limits.

NIOSH made the following critical recommendations:

- Reduce airborne lead exposure by adhering to OSHA lead standards.
- Improve hand and surface hygiene by replacing wet wipes with lead removal products.
- Enhance medical surveillance with baseline and routine blood lead level (BLL) testing for workers.
- Increase training and personal protective equipment (PPE) protocols for workers exposed to lead environments.
- Remediate contaminated vehicles, tools, and shared spaces.

The NIOSH findings indicate that Verizon is not taking sufficient actions to protect its workers. Workers should be able to clock in knowing that at the end of their shifts they will return home safely to their families.

In order for me to better understand how Verizon intends to respond to the NIOSH report, please provide written responses to the following questions by July 9, 2025:

1. What is the status of Verizon's efforts to compile a comprehensive inventory, including geographic mapping, of all known and suspected lead-sheathed cables it owns or for which it is responsible?
2. What steps has Verizon taken since the publication of the *Wall Street Journal* investigation to:
 - (a) Identify and monitor worker exposure to lead from lead-sheathed telecommunications cables?
 - (b) Notify and protect workers performing duties in or near areas with lead-sheathed cables?

⁶ See John Rowley, *NIOSH Health Hazard Evaluation*, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 2324 (May 19, 2025), <https://ibewlocal2324.org/niosh-health-hazard-evaluation/>.

- (c) Inform the public, especially in environmental justice communities, about risks posed by lead-sheathed cables, and field and respond to concerns?
 - (d) Test for and remediate environmental contamination around legacy infrastructure?
 - (e) Provide medical monitoring, treatment, or compensation for lead-exposed workers?
3. What is the status of any investigations by the U.S. Department of Justice, the EPA, or OSHA into Verizon's handling of its lead-sheathed cables?
 4. Will Verizon commit to fully implementing all the NIOSH recommendations, including conducting routine BLL testing and retrofitting hygiene and PPE protocols across all affected facilities? Which recommendations, if any, has Verizon already implemented? What is the status of recommendations not yet implemented?
 5. Has Verizon conducted its own personal air sampling at work sites containing lead-sheathed cables? If so, please provide the results by year and location of the tests.
 - (a) Does Verizon have an explanation for the personal air sample tested by NIOSH that exceeded OSHA limits?
 - (b) How did Verizon previously determine whether to conduct a personal air sampling test?
 6. Has Verizon conducted its own manhole-soil-sediment testing at worksites containing lead-sheathed cables? Does Verizon have an explanation for the bulk sediment sampled that exceeded 30,000 ppm for lead?
 7. Why was Verizon not providing its workers in Massachusetts with lead removal wipes prior to the NIOSH Health Hazard Evaluation? Why did Verizon start to provide them—in place of wet wipes—between the first and second NIOSH site visits?
 8. What internal accountability measures is Verizon adopting to ensure executive leadership is fully informed and responsive to worker safety concerns related to lead exposure from legacy telecommunications cables?

Verizon must fully address the environmental and health impacts of its aging infrastructure. As I continue my work on this matter, I expect from Verizon full transparency, cooperation, and an unambiguous commitment to worker safety.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator