



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

20 Years After 9/11: Examining Emergency Communications

October 7, 2021

Twenty years ago, on 9/11, we suffered the deadliest terrorist attack in our Nation's history. During this unprecedented attack, our brave first responders did their best to locate and rescue survivors and many lives were saved because of their heroism. Unfortunately, their heroic efforts to rescue survivors were hampered by communications challenges.

The 9/11 Commission's investigation found that first responders were forced to make life-and-death decisions based on poor communications. Unable to connect with one another, neither the supporting agencies nor the rescuers themselves could coordinate effectively to help victims. Systems were overloaded, and 9-1-1 call centers placed victims on hold multiple times. Operators faced a "lack of awareness" about what was happening at the World Trade Center and were overwhelmed by the volume of incoming calls. In short, 9/11 revealed fundamental problems with communications systems used by first responders and public safety officials.

Since then, we have made great strides in technology and capabilities, including the creation of Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet Authority), and Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG 911). However, two decades later, several emergency communications challenges remain, including, interoperability issues, network outages, and challenges with FirstNet Authority.

On December 25, 2020, a bomb was detonated downtown in Nashville, Tennessee, interrupting sixty-six emergency communications districts for more than 97 hours. The AT&T hub was one of the buildings blasted during the bombing, forcing failure of the generators, and causing a loss of 9-1-1 communications for four days. A major issue in these situations is that generators are often the backup solution for when a major disaster renders communication towers inoperable, but it may take days to reach an area ravaged by storm or explosion, leaving lives at risk. While we continue to protect our nation against threats posed by foreign and domestic terrorist organizations, we also must ensure adequate focus and funding to end communication infrastructure challenges.

Department of Homeland Security preparedness grants such as Urban Security Initiative (UASI) and State Homeland Security Program (SHSP) serve as an important source of funds for first responders and public safety officials. It allows them to use funding for expenses such as communications equipment, planning, training, and exercises. As the threats to our nation continue to evolve, we must strengthen our communication systems to better protect our nation from potential threats. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about the communication challenges we face and what we can do to aid them in making our communities safer.

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