



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Emergency Preparedness, Response, & Recovery Subcommittee Chairwoman Val Demings (D-FL)

20 Years After 9/11: Examining Emergency Communications Part 2 November 2, 2021

Two months ago, we observed the passing of 20 years since 9/11, the worst terrorist attack experienced on U.S. soil. In remembrance of that tragic day and the lives lost, the Committee on Homeland Security has been examining what happened that day and how our national security fares today.

In October, this Subcommittee held a hearing to examine the progress made in emergency communications since 9/11, focusing on challenges that emergency managers and first responders faced 20 years ago and have continued to face in the two decades following. During that hearing, we received testimony from a city emergency manager, a police chief, a county sheriff. We also heard from a fire chief who served at Ground Zero for two weeks following 9/11. Each witness provided valuable insight into the issues we have faced over the years with emergency communications, including interoperability, power outages, outdated 911 systems, and issues with emergency alerting. As a former Chief of Police and first responder, I was honored to have first responders testify before the subcommittee.

Today, this subcommittee is taking the conversation we started with the emergency managers and first responders and continuing the examination of emergency communications challenges with our Federal partners. We have seen vast improvements in the Nation's emergency communications apparatus through the establishment of programs such as the Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS), the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet Authority), and the Emergency Communications Division. However, as technology continues to evolve, we must ensure that these programs and their platforms are able to evolve with it.

Established in 2006, IPAWS allows Federal, state, territorial, tribal, and local governments to provide a wide range of alerts to the public in the event of an emergency. There have been multiple updates to IPAWS, including the 2012 modernization steps of including enabling authorized federal, state, territorial, tribal, and local, authorities to send Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs) to mobile devices. Additionally, in 2019, IPAWS continued to make improvements by including several enhancements to the system including increased character maximum character count in messages, added support for Spanish-language alerts, and improved geographic accuracy.

However, with these enhancements, there are still challenges that need to be addressed when using IPAWS. Inappropriate use of the system has shown to be an issue with the IPAWS system, contributing to panic and confusion. In January 2018, Hawaii faced a false alert that stated a ballasting missile was headed toward the state, causing chaos. Though resolved as a false alarm, it took nearly 40 minutes for officials to release a retraction statement.

In addition to public alerts, a major component to emergency communications is the network used for emergency correspondence among different agencies. FirstNet Authority allows first responders to communicate with one another on a dedicated platform. With 95 percent of its network having been

deployed nationwide, FirstNet has been widely praised by first responders for its reliability in emergency situations. However, threats to the homeland by way of natural or man-made disasters can still cause outages. On Christmas Day 2020, a bomb was detonated in downtown Nashville, Tennessee disrupting phone, internet, 911 call centers, and FirstNet.

It is imperative that we continue to harden our technology and ensure our communication networks are resilient from all hazards. Though communications, public alerting, and resilient infrastructure are priorities for this subcommittee, the public may only experience their benefit – or challenges – during times of crisis. Today’s hearing will serve as an important forum to continue the conversation on the current state of emergency communications systems and any gaps that may persist.

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