



**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HOMELAND SECURITY AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY**

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**Government of the District of Columbia
Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency**

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**Examining Emergency Communications Successes and Challenges in the
District of Columbia since 9/11**

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery**

October 7, 2021

**U.S. House of Representatives
Virtual Briefing
Washington, D.C.**

Thank you, Chairwoman Demings, Ranking Member Cammack, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Dr. Christopher Rodriguez and I am the Director of the DC Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency. As an appointee of Mayor Muriel Bowser, I am honored to lead an agency that is a national leader in emergency management. I appear today to speak with you about the strides the District of Columbia has made in emergency communications since the tragic events on 9/11.

When it comes to emergency communications, there is no place like the National Capital Region. With frequent special events and the ever-present threat of terrorism and disasters, the hazard landscape in DC is unique. The District is home to over 40 local and federal response agencies, and we have a robust mutual aid system that spans the Mid-Atlantic region. All need to communicate seamlessly and reliably across the whole spectrum of possible contingencies.

People often think of emergency communications solely in terms of radios. But the solutions to these communications challenges are multifaceted and span technologies beyond just land mobile radios. With my time today I will discuss a few key solutions, successes, and challenges that are unique to the District.

As mobile data and cellular communications become increasingly important elements of effective emergency response, the District first utilized the FirstNet service for our first responders in 2018. By providing dedicated cellular connectivity for the public safety community, FirstNet enables us to continue sharing voice, data, and video even in the face of extreme network congestion. Additionally, our partnership with FirstNet has enabled us to request rapidly deployable cellular infrastructure to support the demands of large events and incidents. Leading up to the 2021 Presidential Inauguration and on January 6th, we had coordinated with FirstNet to have such infrastructure in place to cover the US Capitol complex. Ultimately, this collaboration and their dedicated bandwidth allowed FirstNet to perform reliably for our first responders at the US Capitol on January 6th. We are in the process of working with FirstNet to acquire two of our own compact rapid deployable units, which will contribute to increased resilience and self-sufficiency for the District's emergency communications.

While the ability to communicate between government partners is vital, the ability to quickly reach the public with lifesaving information in emergency situations is equally important. There are many ways to quickly push emergency information to the public during a crisis, but a unique challenge in the District is that we receive an extremely high volume of visitors and transient populations. These individuals may not be in the District long enough to learn about opt-in emergency notification systems or follow public safety officials on social media. Wireless Emergency Alert, or WEA, technology has proven to be an incredibly valuable resource in our public alert and warning toolbox.

The DC Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency has been both a regional and national leader in the WEA space since just before the 2017 Presidential Inauguration, when we became the first local alerting authority to issue a live WEA test. Following this successful test, our staff were asked to share best practices and alerting procedures with state, local, tribal, territorial, and even our FEMA partners. While WEA is a powerful tool, it is not without limitations. The accuracy of geofencing is not perfectly accurate, which can lead to bleed over outside of the intended target area. Additionally, WEA is a high-profile alerting method. Overuse or inappropriate use of the technology can lead to individuals opting out of the service which would limit or ability to reach them in a truly dire emergency. The District has found success in using WEA for situations such as Boil Water Advisories, announcing curfews (for example during the BLM protests), and extreme weather events. While WEA remains an incredibly effective tool to alert the public in the District, we employ a multimodal approach which includes our Opt-In Alert DC program, Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (which includes WEA), social media and traditional media messaging, and door-to-door canvassing.

Improving the interoperability and reliability of emergency communications systems is a top priority for the District of Columbia. I appreciate the opportunity to share our experiences with the subcommittee.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.