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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

***Ensuring Coordination and Cooperation: A Review of the
Emergency Communications Offices within the
Department of Homeland Security***

November 17, 2011 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Ensuring Coordination and Cooperation: A Review of the Emergency Communications Offices within the Department of Homeland Security”:

“According to the Congressional Research Service, over the last ten years, Congress has appropriated over \$13 billion dollars to States and local communities to improve emergency communications.

Despite this funding, interoperability remains a concern for state and local homeland security directors, public safety officials, and first responders.

As a former volunteer firefighter, I know that interoperable communications can save lives.

And while it appears that much progress has been made, anecdotal evidence indicates that many first responders still are unable to communicate with each other.

Communications problems continue between fire and police departments within the same county; between police departments in neighboring counties; and between fire departments in adjacent towns.

These communication problems are not new.

The events of September 11th exposed huge gaps in the interoperability of emergency communications equipment within the first responder community.

Four years later, Hurricane Katrina reminded the nation that the gaps exposed by 9/11 remained.

Congress responded with legislation. We passed the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act (PKEMRA).

In addition to providing grant funding, PKEMRA created the Office of Emergency Communication (OEC) within the Department of Homeland Security.

OEC was given the responsibility of assuring that interoperability challenges would be addressed.

A DHS policy memorandum signed by Secretary Napolitano in 2009 underscored OEC’s responsibility in leading “DHS efforts to advance interoperable emergency communications”.

Yet I am told that despite this memo, OEC’s ability to coordinate other DHS agencies is hampered by reorganization within NPPD.

Mr. Chairman, I hope this hearing can help us determine whether this office has the authority it needs to address this nation's continuing interoperability challenge.

I look forward to hearing about the staffing and support of this office and how it is administered under the new NPPD organizational structure.

But while I have concerns about the authority of OEC and its ability to reach our interoperability goals, I must also mention that the budget cuts to grant funding approved by this House will make it virtually impossible for this office or any office to address this nation's continuing interoperability challenge.

Let me be clear. For FY 2012, the proposed \$1 billion dollars in funding for first responders is less than half of the FY2010 appropriation.

In addition to this overall reduction, the bill defunded the Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant program (IECGP), which is specifically designated to address these problems.

In essence, this budget will likely spell the end of our interoperability efforts.

Having lived through 9/11 and Katrina, we know what happens when fire fighters, police officers and EMTs cannot talk to each other.

Congressional hearings and Presidential Commissions confirmed the lives lost due to the lack of interoperable radios.

Despite this evidence and our own memories, my colleagues on the other side of the aisle created a budget that asks each of us to ignore and forget. We have to forget the first responders of 9/11 and Katrina. We have to ignore the likelihood of natural disasters. But mostly, we have to forget that interoperable radios save lives.

Mr. Chairman, I cannot forget and I cannot resolve to do nothing. My only hope is that my colleagues on the other side of the aisle reconsider."

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