

OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER LAURA RICHARDSON
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications

“Resilient Communications: Current Challenges and Future Advancements”

Wednesday, September 12, 2012

Yesterday, as we observed the 11th anniversary of the September 11th attacks, we were reminded of the chaos that ensued as courageous first responders struggled to use inadequate communications equipment to coordinate and affect their mission.

Although the nation has come a long way in gaining operable and interoperable communications capabilities, 11 years and \$13 billion dollars later, we still have not achieved the goal of providing nationwide interoperable communications capabilities for our first responders. Moreover, the derecho that hit the Midwest and Northeast in June demonstrated that even the 911 technology that we take for granted is vulnerable.

No matter how established a communications technology is, or how much we invest to improve it, it is only as reliable as the policies we have in place to ensure that it works. I am pleased that earlier this year, President Obama signed into law legislation creating a Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network.

I am hopeful that this network will ultimately achieve the goal of providing our first responders with a robust, state-of-the-art interoperable communications network. At the same time, I am mindful that building this network will be expensive, and that it will require strong collaboration with the private sector and the support of the States if it is to achieve its maximum potential.

Toward that end, I am troubled that that the FirstNet Board, which was appointed last month does not include an individual representing State governments, and that States might not participate because of the expense. I will be interested in learning today how the FirstNet’s federal partners can help create incentives to States to participate in Public Safety Broadband Network.

I also encourage the FCC to work with FirstNet to undertake efforts to create strict technical and interoperability requirements to ensure that networks developed by States that opt out of FirstNet are interoperable with the federal network. Strong federal leadership is required to ensure that the public gets the nationwide interoperability that it is paying for.

Additionally, federal leadership and support is needed to ensure that existing emergency communications technologies are resilient and improve at the pace the public expects. As many people in this room may have experienced, power outages and back-up power failures in Verizon’s network disrupted 911 service across Northern Virginia, leaving over 1 million people unable to call 911 for help if they needed it. I understand that Verizon and the FCC have each conducted investigations into the 911 failure.

I look forward to hearing about the proactive measures Verizon has agreed to undertake to prevent similar 911 failures in the future and about the efforts the FCC will undertake to improve the resiliency of the 911 system.

Additionally, while it is important to ensure the resiliency of existing 911 technology, we must support the transition to Next Generation 911 technology. Current 911 technology is outdated, and does not have the capabilities to receive the full complement of data and text information that the public is capable of communicating. Many people incorrectly believe that 911 centers can receive text messages. A Next Generation 911 system that can support innovative technology will better serve all of us. The Federal government must provide the guidance and resources to help State and local governments implement the Next Generation of 911.

Finally, I would like to recognize the fiscal burdens faced by States as the struggle to maintain the emergency communications capabilities they have achieved through years of investment. Federal guidance for State emergency communications investments must establish clear guidelines to ensure cash-strapped states do not waste their limited resources. Again, I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today and I look forward to their testimony.