Statement of Ranking Member Eric Swalwell (D-CA)

"Emergency MGMT 2.0: How @SocialMedia & New Tech are Transforming
Preparedness, Response, & Recovery #Disasters #Part2 #Govt/NGOs"

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications

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I'd like to begin by extending my sympathies to those who died or were injured during the plane crash at San Francisco Airport (SFO) this weekend and to their families. And, I'd like to thank the EMS teams, firefighters, and police for their heroic response.

This hearing is very timely, for we just saw in this horrible accident how critical and relevant social media can be in times of crisis. Following what happened, survivors used Twitter, Facebook, and Path to assure loved ones that they were safe. SFO used social media to provide the public up-to-date information on response efforts and the National Transportation Safety Board did the same with respect to its investigation. I myself used social media like Twitter both to share and learn information.

And, just yesterday, President Obama gave remarks at the White House in which he talked about his Administration's desire to encourage government to be smarter, effective, and efficient, through its use of technology. He cited FEMA's use of the web and apps in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

In this new age of social media and instant communication, it shouldn't be surprising that they now play an important role in disaster response. And, their use after this plane accident is just the most recent example.

I have an info-graphic on the screen, provided by the University of San Francisco – located just across the bay from my congressional district – which provides great information on how modern technology is impacting disaster response. For example, 76 percent of those polled used social media to let people know they are ok. And, 18 percent got emergency information from Facebook.

Much of this social media is developed and produced in Silicon Valley, and I'm proud to represent Northern Silicon Valley in Congress. What Silicon Valley companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter are doing to help ordinary citizens volunteer, share information, and be more prepared for disasters was discussed at the first hearing in this series held last month. I applaud them for their efforts.

Today our focus will be on how government and our primary nongovernmental response organization, the Red Cross, use social media in disaster situations. This will hopefully include a discussion of both the opportunities and challenges to using this modern technology.

Among our witnesses are Sergeant Kierce, Director of the Jersey City Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (OEM). This office has been on the forefront of interoperable communications and social media. Last month, the office was recognized in Washington, DC with an international 2013 Computerworld Honors Laureate for implementation of a remarkable communication and surveillance system.

With its Internet-based Mutual Link, Jersey City OEM can facilitate communication across various frequencies and types of communications, provide first-responder users access to security video systems, and enable first responders to share images of disaster and videos with hospitals and other public safety officials. By integrating both social media and other enhanced communications technologies into its emergency response capabilities, Jersey City will be able to respond to disasters more quickly and more effectively.

Although cities like Jersey City and San Francisco have proven particularly adept in integrating new technologies into its disaster response plans, I understand that other cities have not been as successful. To be fair, Jersey City and San Francisco have benefited from significant grants from federal homeland security programs.

One of our challenges is that as funding for these programs have been reduced, fewer cities have had the resources necessary to develop robust communications systems and to cultivate the expertise necessary to effectively integrate social media into disaster response plans. The *Social Media in the Emergency Management Field: 2012 Survey Results*, a study released by the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) and the nonprofit research organization CNA, indicates that although local governments consider themselves at least "moderately familiar" with social media, the "primary barrier to emergency management agencies' use of social media is a lack of dedicated personnel."
Additionally, there appears to be a generation gap when it comes to using social media – on the part of the public and some emergency managers. It's hard to use social media to aid in disaster response if you can't spare the personnel to do the work, or don't have anyone who understands the technology.

Another challenge is that there is undeniably a socio-economic component with respect to use of and access to social media. Some Americans, particular those who are low-income, simply don't have the same level of access to the Internet, smart phones, or WiFi. We can't ignore the impact of this "digital divide" as we begin to integrate social media into disaster response activities. We can't leave them behind, or without needed information.

Finally, for the government to best utilize social media, it's not just about it putting information on Twitter and Facebook. Agencies need to be providing data in a useable, open source format so the high technology companies like Google can easily and quickly incorporate it to their own webpages, apps, and other portals.

I look forward to discussing with our witnesses both the opportunities presented by social media and the challenges I laid out, as well as how we can go about tackling them. Be it more resources, new statutory authority, or better guidance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), we should be doing all we can to best harness the tremendous power of social media in disaster relief and recovery. The Congress should stand ready to work with the President in this effort, part of his broader goal to make government more technologically savvy.