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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Assessing First Responder Communications

Emergency Preparedness, Response & Communications Subcommittee

October 12, 2017

From Texas and Florida to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the 2017 Hurricane Season has been devastating. It has been a true test of emergency response capabilities including the resiliency of our emergency communications systems.

Before discussing emergency communications, I would like to share some observations from my trip to Puerto Rico last weekend. Not since Hurricane Katrina have I seen devastation of this magnitude in the United States. People are without food and water. Critical infrastructure has been destroyed. The power is still out on most of the island and generators are failing at medical centers.

Lives are at stake. It is critical that President Trump and Republican House Leadership stop posturing and give Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands focused, swift, and determined attention today and in the difficult days ahead.

Today, the House will begin consideration of a woefully inadequate disaster supplemental that fails to include funding for electric grid repair and modernization, community development block grants, and Social Service Block Grants, among other things. We can and must do better for our fellow Americans.

Turning to the subject of today's hearing, as I mentioned, this hurricane season has tested our emergency communications capabilities. I will be interested in the witnesses' perspectives about how well our emergency communications infrastructure performed, how Federal resources supported emergency communications, and whether there are unique communications challenges in non-contiguous territories like Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

We cannot afford to have our emergency communications systems fail when disasters strike. We must incorporate the lessons learned from these most recent disasters into future emergency communications plans.

Looking to the future, I am encouraged to hear of the progress FirstNet is making as it continues its efforts to build out the public safety broadband network. As a former

volunteer firefighter in rural area, I hope that access to the network will be affordable, secure, and ubiquitous.

I am hopeful that FirstNet will finally help us succeed in closing our interoperable emergency communications gap – but that can only happen if the those who need to access the network can afford it and if it is available everywhere, even in rural areas..

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