



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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## Hearing Statement of Emergency Preparedness, Response, & Recovery Subcommittee Chairwoman Val Demings (D-FL)

### *20 Years After 9/11: Examining Emergency Communications*

October 7, 2021

Last month, our nation marked 20 years passed since the worst terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. The Committee on Homeland Security joined many of our colleagues from New York and New Jersey to visit the National September 11 Memorial & Museum and held a roundtable with first responders. We have also conducted several hearings on the evolution of the Department of Homeland Security and heard from our Intelligence Community regarding the current and emerging threats to our Homeland.

Today, the Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Subcommittee will examine the progress made in emergency communications since September 11, 2001 and discuss the challenges that may persist today. As we know from emergency managers and first responders who served on September 11th and the 9/11 Commission Report, police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical services experienced significant problems communicating within their own agencies and across all who responded that day.

On the morning of September 11, I was serving as the Orlando Police Department's Captain of the division stationed at the Orlando International Airport. As reports of the attack on the World Trade Center emerged and the Federal Aviation Administration ordered all aircraft grounded, airport and law enforcement leadership had to immediately execute emergency operations to protect passengers, employees, and the public. Further, given the location and runway length, the airport became a safe harbor for aircraft to land in compliance with FAA orders. Communications and interoperability were essential to our ability to keep the public safe that day.

Over the next months and years, incredible strides were made to address the system failure on September 11 and improve the Nation's emergency communications apparatus through programs such as the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet Authority) and the Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS). However, challenges in operability and interoperability still persist, and our aging 911 infrastructure poses additional vulnerabilities.

Operability and interoperability remain among the greatest concerns that first responders and public safety officials face. During the 9/11 attacks, due to insufficient technology police officers and firefighters were unable to communicate among themselves and with each other, delaying response efforts. I know firsthand how valuable every second is when responding to an emergency and that being unable to get in touch with fellow officers can have detrimental consequences.

Climate change also poses significant and growing challenges for emergency communications. From rapid-spreading wildfires in the west to increasingly strong and frequent hurricanes, cell towers and radio communications systems remain vulnerable to critical failures. In August, Hurricane Ida, a powerful Category 4 storm, crashed the New Orleans, Louisiana 911 call center and FirstNet Authority, making it difficult, if not impossible to respond to emergencies.

Members of Congress have an important role in the improvement of emergency communications technology. We must continue to provide funding through grants such as the State Homeland Security Program and the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI). These programs have provided critical federal funding for jurisdictions to buy equipment, build and fix communications towers, and make broadband improvements.

While grant programs such as UASI are created specifically for urban areas, rural communities and tribal lands face their own challenges with broadband and connectivity that can also complicate emergency response. Federal grants support these communities but can always be more robust to meet the needs more completely. Though communications, interoperability, and resilient infrastructure are priorities for emergency and first responders, the public may only experience their benefit – or challenges – during times of crisis. Today's hearing will serve as an important forum to understand the current state of emergency communications systems and any gaps that may persist.

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