

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Donald M. Payne, Jr. (D-NJ)

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications Joint Hearing

Threats to Space Assets and Implications for Homeland Security

Wednesday, March 29, 2017

Almost five years ago, Hurricane Sandy slammed into the East Coast, wreaking havoc on critical infrastructure – including the communications systems first responders and emergency managers rely on for planned and unplanned events.

“Satellite broadband service” supported voice and data connectivity at FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers and “communications and broadband Internet service” was critical to Habitat for Humanity’s rebuilding effort in Breezy Point, New York.

But one of the most important factors that made the Federal response to Hurricane Sandy so much better than its response to Hurricane Katrina was its forward thinking approach – its actions before the storm hit.

That pro-active approach was facilitated by weather satellites that gave emergency managers at the Federal, State, and local level the information they needed to execute evacuation plans, secure infrastructure, and pre-position critical assets.

Today, satellite technology provides resiliency to the Emergency Alert System and 9-1-1 public safety answering points, ensuring emergency responders’ ability to warn the public early and the public’s ability to call for help when they need it.

In New Jersey, the emergency communications system developed with our NTIA B-TOP grant, known as “JerseyNet,” leverages satellite technology to provide resiliency for voice and data capabilities on its deployable system-on-wheels.

But even as we rely on satellite technology to improve the resiliency of emergency communications systems, those systems are themselves vulnerable to physical and cyber attacks by state and non-state actors.

The potential disruption and harm that such an attack could do to critical infrastructure, in particular maritime and aviation systems, are particularly troubling.

In 2013, a man used an illegal GPS jamming device in his truck to hide from his employer. This activity interfered with the satellite-based tracking system at Newark Liberty International Airport that is essential to tracking a plane’s location in the air and on the runway for air traffic controllers. Fortunately, the incident did not endanger any flights and no one was injured, but we were lucky.

Emergency managers need to understand the vulnerabilities that exist in their own communities. Today, I will be interested in understanding what we can do to help first responders understand the threats to the satellite technologies as well as the vulnerabilities such threats may create in their own communities.