

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

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications

Assessing First Responder Communications

Thursday, October 12, 2017

This is the Subcommittee's first hearing on emergency communications since the 113th Congress. I am eager to hear about the progress both the Office of Emergency Communications and FirstNet have made in advancing interoperable emergency communications efforts.

Since I joined this Subcommittee in 2013, I have been a strong advocate of policies to improve interoperable emergency communications capabilities.

In fact, I authored a number of measures to help DHS achieve interoperability among its components and to help bolster state and regional governance structures for emergency communications planning.

That is why I have been concerned to learn about the dwindling number of dedicated, full-time Statewide Interoperability Coordinators, or SWICs.

I am concerned about how the reduction in full-time SWICs – and the disbanding of other governance structures – might undermine progress made toward improving emergency communications capabilities since 9/11.

SWICs have been integral in ensuring that emergency communications plans are coordinated, update-to-date, and exercised. Every first responder I have ever spoken to has told me that the key to interoperability is not technology, it's governance.

So I am interested to know why States are no longer funding full-time SWICs and what Congress can do to prevent weakened governance.

I am pleased that New Jersey was among the first States to opt-in to FirstNet. I am encouraged by the potential it holds to revolutionize emergency communications. The capabilities FirstNet promises will save lives if the network is built and managed properly.

That said, I am concerned about the requirement that first responders in certain major metropolitan areas – like Newark and Jersey City – vacate the T-band by 2023. Unless Congress acts, first responders in my district will get knocked off their spectrum and be forced to relocate.

Before I close, Mr. Chairman, I would like to send my thoughts to those suffering in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. As Ranking Member of the Emergency Preparedness Subcommittee, it is clear to me that something in our national preparedness doctrine has failed.

I hope that in the very near future, this Subcommittee can take a hard look at what went wrong in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands so we can make sure people in our country never suffer like this again.