

**Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins**

“Ten Years After 9/11: Improving Emergency Communications”

**Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
July 27, 2011**

The effectiveness of emergency communications has emerged as a concern due to the failures that occurred in the wake of the 9-11 attacks and the Hurricane Katrina disaster. As both of these catastrophes demonstrated, the lack of reliable communications before, during, and after a disaster can cost lives, worsen damage, and slow response operations.

Not only did the 9-11 attacks represent a “failure of imagination” as the 9-11 Commission found, they also revealed the inadequacy of communications equipment, technology, and systems. The 9-11 Commission report cited many problems with communications among firefighters on September 11th and found that the technical failure of the fire department’s radios was a “contributing factor” to the loss of firefighter lives, albeit not the primary cause.

Incredibly, when Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, we saw many of the same problems we witnessed four years earlier in the 9-11 attacks. Emergency personnel had incompatible equipment even within the same Louisiana parish. Major communications problems arose when towers and electronic equipment were destroyed; 911 centers were rendered inoperable, and the FEMA Mobile Emergency Response Systems were overwhelmed.

A FEMA official who was in New Orleans after Katrina estimated that the lack of effective communication at the Superdome reduced FEMA’s effectiveness by 90 percent.

This Committee conducted an in-depth investigation into the failed response to Hurricane Katrina and detailed the various communication failures associated with the storm. Although there are numerous examples, one of the most notable assessments that sticks in my mind came from Haley Barbour, the Governor of Mississippi. He said: “My head of the National Guard might as well have been a Civil War general for the first two or three days because he could only find out what is going on by sending somebody. He did have helicopters instead of horses, so it was a little faster, but the same sort of thing.”

When seconds and minutes are important, communications systems must be both operable and interoperable so that first responders can talk to each other and coordinate their operations. We never again want to see individuals

on rooftops pleading for help that may be delayed because of an inability of responders to communicate with one another. We must be especially sensitive to the ability to communicate with the most vulnerable in our population, such as children, the elderly, or those with special needs.

As the 10th anniversary of 9-11 approaches, how first responders communicate with one another and how Americans receive emergency information remain challenges.

Public safety officials should have access to state-of-the-art, interoperable communications equipment to use during emergencies. But we must be sure that resources are invested carefully and that an effective and efficient structure is established to manage emergency communications. Plans and systems must be tested during state, regional, and national level exercises.

Today, the Committee will examine the progress made in the last decade and explore what more needs to be done. After Katrina, Congress created the Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) within DHS, which developed a National Emergency Communications Plan, stood up Regional Working Groups, and established goals to measure progress.

The Chairman and I also created an Interoperability Emergency Communications Grant Program to support state plans. This program has supplemented other federal, state, and local investments. According to CRS, as much as \$13 billion in federal funding has been spent on emergency communications during the past nine years.

What do we have to show for these investments? Are we making progress? Is the money being well spent so that we will be better prepared for the next major disaster?

My own state of Maine has done a great deal to increase the ability of first responders to communicate with each other. Notably, the State has also been working with Canada to ensure that first responders across our more than 600-mile international border can communicate with each other in an emergency.

The investments, training, new equipment, and planning have produced some successes. For example, in recent testimony, FEMA Administrator Fugate testified that interoperable communications were effectively used after the Joplin, Missouri, tornado and that the success of state and local responders reduced the burden on the federal government.

Another issue is the importance of effective communication with the public before, during, and after an incident. Much like the communication among first responders, the communication between officials and the public is vitally important and can save lives. I will soon introduce legislation on which I

look forward to working with the Chairman, to strengthen the nation's public alert and warning system.

I want to welcome all of the witnesses.