



United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Ten Years After 9/11: Improving Emergency Communications

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

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Good morning. This is another in a series of hearings that Senator Collins and I have been doing as we approach the 10th anniversary of 9-11 to essentially evaluate what lessons we learned from that tragic day and what we've done to act on those lessons. One of the revelations of that day was the enormous gaps in our emergency communications abilities. A lot of first responders couldn't coordinate their rescue efforts because they couldn't talk to each other.

As one New York City fire chief told the 9-11 Commission: "People watching on TV certainly had more knowledge of what was happening a hundred floors above us than we did in the lobby [of the World Trade Center]."

That proved fatal because many firefighters inside the Twin Towers didn't hear the call to evacuate.

In its report, the 9-11 Commission said:

"The inability to communicate was a critical problem at the World Trade Center, Pentagon and Somerset County Pennsylvania, crash sites, where multiple agencies and multiple jurisdictions responded. The occurrence of this at three very different sites is strong evidence that compatible and adequate communications among public safety organizations at the local, state, and federal levels remains an important problem."

As a result, the 9-11 Commission recommended the federal government take the lead in helping state and local governments establish interoperable communications systems.

A year after the Commission issued its report, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast. We saw again the relevance of the 9-11 Commission recommendation - not in relation to man-made attacks, but to natural disasters as well. In the Gulf Coast, as a result of Katrina, the lack of interoperable communications was compounded by an inability of many communications systems to operate at all under those circumstances.

Phone lines, cell towers, and electrical systems were destroyed by the storm, knocking many communication systems offline, making it impossible at times for many first responders and government officials on the Gulf Coast to talk to each other.

Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour memorably said: "My head of the National Guard might as well have been a Civil War general . . . because he could only find out what [was] going on by sending somebody."

Today, at this hearing, we're going to assess what progress we've made and what gaps remain in making public safety communications more interoperable in a crisis.

In assessing what's happened since 9-11, it's important to remember that planning and funding decisions for emergency communications traditionally have been splintered across over 55,000 public safety organizations across our country that operate on many different bands of radio spectrum.

But as we look back over almost 10 years, we have made significant progress in bringing these varied organizations together.

The "Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007," the second wave of legislation from the 9-11 Commission report, and written by the Committee, created the Office of Emergency Communications – or OEC – within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to coordinate with state and

local governments in addressing the many challenges that come with trying to create interoperable communications systems.

With assistance from the OEC, each state and territory has now created a communications interoperability plan and has appointed a state interoperability coordinator. I'm pleased to say these officials meet face-to-face twice a year and are in ongoing communication about how to improve interoperability.

That's very significant because a few years ago, it wasn't always clear who was the point person in each State was for interoperability, or if there actually was such a point person.

In 2008, OEC issued the National Emergency Communications Plan to establish clear goals for improving interoperability. And to ensure that the plan is more than just a piece of paper, OEC has been testing to see if its goals are being met. In 2010, OEC tested 60 urban areas to see if they could demonstrate that they could rapidly establish communications among agencies from all levels of government in the event of an emergency.

I'm pleased to say all 60 urban areas met the goals set by OEC.

They're now working with the States to test the capabilities of the more than 3,000 counties across the country.

Significant investments in many state and local communications systems – supplemented by over \$4 billion in grant funds from the DHS – have significantly enhanced voice communications and interoperability over what they were a few years ago. It's comforting to report one of the greatest success stories comes from Louisiana, which has used state money, DHS grants, and stimulus dollars to build a single, statewide radio communications system that provides daily voice communications to more than 60,000 federal, state and local users.

This system proved its worth during the evacuation of almost two million people before Hurricane Gustav in August 2008, and again after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill when the system was the back-bone for establishing interoperable communications among the various first responders in the Gulf States.

Despite such progress in voice communications, we still have failed to fulfill the recommendation of the 9-11 Commission to set aside a portion of the radio spectrum and dedicate it to create a coast-to-coast, interoperable, digital, emergency communications network.

We have the opportunity to do that right now and we need to seize it.

Currently, public safety agencies transmit on narrow slices of non-contiguous spectrum that can't handle the kinds of large chunks of data available to the average smart phone user.

Turning over a large contiguous slice of the broadband spectrum – which is known as the D Block—to public safety would give our first responders a 21st Century communications system with equipment that could share information with any other department anywhere in the nation.

Right now, as one of my staff members put it, the average first responder doesn't have the capability of the average teenager with a smart phone. That really is unacceptable.

If we close this gap, for instance, firefighters could get digital building diagrams from the local building department so they would know the floor plan and exits before they even got to the burning building.

Paramedics could send a patient's vital signs to the emergency room, so doctors and nurses would know what they were dealing with before the patient arrived.

A police officer at the scene of a crime could take electronic fingerprints and immediately compare them to Federal, State and local databases. Or the officer who gets a partial read of a license plate could immediately tap into a database to help determine who owns the car, and whether they have outstanding warrants against them.

Senator McCain and I have sponsored legislation to set aside the D Block for first responders – the "Broadband for First Responders Act of 2011" – and we are committed to working with Senators Rockefeller and Hutchison, chairman and ranking member of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, who have reported similar D Block legislation out of their Committee.

But I will note, Senator Reid, in his proposal to end this debt ceiling crisis, has included auction money from the spectrum as contributing to diminishing the deficit. He has allocated \$7 billion of that for these purposes. For reasons that are not clear to me yet, that's \$4 billion less than our legislation and we want to see what's going on with that. But all the authorizing language is in Senator Reid's proposal, so we've got the possibility of actually achieving this in the next week, and that would be great.

In this 10th year after 9-11 adopting this legislation is one of the best things we can do to show we've learned the lessons from 9-11. The bottom line is our first responders need a nationwide network giving them the most modern broadband capabilities.

Senator Collins.