

Statement for the Record

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“Interoperable Communications: Assessing Progress Since 9/11”

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Thank you, Chairman Brooks, Ranking Member Payne, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. It is a pleasure to discuss the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) collaborative efforts to improve interoperable communications for emergency response providers and Government officials. Thirteen years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, there still is no shortage of reminders of the need for an effective and efficient emergency response framework to manage incidents and restore essential services in the aftermath of a disaster.

A top priority for DHS continues to be improving the communications capabilities of those who are the first to arrive at the scene of a disaster site—the Nation’s emergency responders. Public safety personnel must have access to reliable and instantaneous communications at all times to effectively coordinate response and recovery operations. The Department recognizes that establishing emergency communications is not solely a technology problem that can be solved by equipment alone. All of the critical factors for a successful interoperability solution—governance, standard operating procedures, training and exercises, the integration of systems into daily operations, in addition to technology—must continue to be addressed through the collective work of our programs.

Further, DHS believes that effective emergency communications require continued partnering with the millions of emergency responders who are the first to arrive on the scene of an incident, as well as the communications industry, non-governmental organizations, the general public, and citizens of affected communities. In addition, we continue to work closely and collaboratively with FirstNet as they pursue their mission of establishing a nationwide interoperable broadband network dedicated to public safety which will be an integral part of the continued evolution of effective public safety communications. We look forward to discussing our respective efforts and key accomplishments to make the nation more secure and resilient to the threats and hazards which pose the greatest risk.

Office of Emergency Communications

The Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) was established within the National Protection and Programs Directorate's (NPPD) Office of Cybersecurity and Communications (CS&C) as part of the congressional response to the communications challenges faced during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Since its inception, OEC has been focused on improving the communication capabilities of the nation's emergency responders. To that end, OEC coordinates policy and assists in the development and implementation of operable and interoperable emergency communications capabilities for emergency responders at all levels of government, including Federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial.

Since 2007, OEC has made progress in several key areas that enable emergency responders to interoperate in an all-hazards environment. In 2008, OEC led the development of the first National Emergency Communications Plan (NECP). The Secretary recently signed an updated NECP that outlines wholesale updates to the initial plan and accounts for the significant changes that have taken place within the emergency communications landscape in the past six years.

As an integral part of the development of the second NECP, earlier this year, OEC completed a comprehensive nationwide planning effort with more than 350 stakeholders from the emergency response community, which included significant feedback and coordination with the SAFECOM Executive Committee, the SAFECOM Emergency Response Council, and the National Public Safety Telecommunications Council. These stakeholder groups are comprised of national public safety association members, state and local emergency responders, and representatives within Federal agencies, and collectively represent the interests of millions of emergency responders, as well as the state and local governments served by public safety communications. Owing to this collaborative effort between OEC and our partners from the very beginning, the updated NECP encapsulates broad stakeholder input and is slated to gain wide acceptance within the public safety community.

OEC Accomplishments

OEC has addressed national gaps in the emergency communications mission areas of planning, coordination, and training. OEC pursued a number of strategies to bring the Nation up to a baseline level of communications capability, characterized as a state where emergency response providers and Government officials can effectively communicate as needed and when authorized. OEC leveraged the Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program to help states and territories establish critical Statewide Interoperability Coordinators and governance structures such as the Statewide Interoperability Governance Board. These personnel and associated governance structures form the focal point and foundation for emergency communications efforts at the state and local level. Their ongoing efforts remain vital even as their original grant funding mechanisms have been reduced.

Once established, Statewide Interoperability Coordinators and governing bodies were integral to building out the first Statewide Communications Interoperability Plans, which defined a roadmap for each jurisdiction to improve interoperability and emergency communications. In support of

these efforts, OEC also provided technical assistance to every state and territory to assist in the implementation of their respective statewide plan. The creation of Statewide Interoperability Coordinators and governing bodies represent an investment by Congress to create a state and local infrastructure to address these issues. To make the most of this investment, these positions and these governing bodies should lead the way in ensuring that planning, coordination, training, and exercise at the state and local level, continue to drive efforts to incorporate new technologies into response-level emergency communications.

At the Federal level, OEC led the effort to establish the Congressionally-mandated Emergency Communications Preparedness Center to coordinate guidance for all agencies funding interoperability and emergency communications. By leveraging the SAFECOM Executive Committee and Emergency Response Council, OEC worked to ensure the adoption of new policies, plans, and standard operating procedures across our Nation. Moreover, OEC ensured that priority access services such as the Government Emergency Telecommunications Service and the Wireless Priority Services program were available for emergency response providers and Government officials from all levels of government when those personnel relied on commercial telecommunications services.

As a result of these efforts and OEC's continued focus on the fundamentals of planning, coordination, and training: interoperable emergency communications has improved Nationwide over the last seven years. To catalogue key successes:

- OEC has conducted more than 1,000 technical assistance workshops since 2007.
- OEC has trained over 5,000 emergency response providers and Government officials in communications positions that support the National Incident Management System.
- There are now more than 430,000 Government Emergency Telecommunications Service and Wireless Priority Services users.
- As part of implementing the first NECP, OEC evaluated the response-level communications capabilities of 60 urban areas and more than 2,800 county level jurisdictions¹. OEC found:
 - Most jurisdictions demonstrated consistent communications capabilities during events, with 74% of reporting counties indicating “established” or “advanced” level communications during routine incidents and events.
 - Nationwide, the percentage of jurisdictions reporting formal interoperability standard operating procedures—those that are published and actively used by jurisdictions during incident responses—increased from 51 percent of respondents in 2006 to 86 percent in 2011.

We are proud of these accomplishments and the progress that they represent for our Nation's preparedness in emergency communications. No list of accomplishments, however, can ever compare to seeing such work put to use during an actual event like the Boston Marathon bombings.

¹ The NECP defines response-level communications as the capacity of individuals with primary operational leadership responsibility to manage resources and make timely decisions during an incident.

Emergency Communications During the Response to the Boston Marathon Bombings

The tragic events of the 2013 Boston Marathon killed three people and injured nearly 300 more. However, nearly all of the after action reports agree that a greater number of lives could have been lost if not for the successfully coordinated and executed emergency response, enabled by functional and interoperable communications. In the immediate aftermath of the bombings, brave emergency responders and Government officials relied on their training to quickly organize a chaotic situation, medical personnel triaged on the scene and later in hospitals, while ordinary citizens performed heroic feats for their fellow citizens. Emergency communications worked during the Marathon bombings, due to the diligent efforts of Federal, state, and local emergency response providers and Government officials. OEC's role was to assist our partners in planning, coordinating, training, and exercising emergency response protocols before the Boston Marathon occurred.

In 2010, as a part of the NECP implementation, which focused on assessing emergency communications capabilities at the Nation's major urban areas, OEC assessed the Boston area's communications capabilities during that year's Boston Marathon. OEC's assessment recommended further integrating communications into the event's overall command and control functions. OEC provided technical assistance to the region to train additional communications unit leaders and provided DHS grant funding to train more communications unit technicians. The region also participated in several OEC-facilitated statewide planning workshops, helping to ensure that public safety entities understood how to leverage existing resources and capabilities.

Prior to the 2013 Boston Marathon and based on a recommendation from the 2010 OEC assessment, the region also created a comprehensive event communications plan. The new communications unit itself added a medical command and control radio network.

This focus on the fundamentals of successful emergency communications—planning, coordination, training, and exercise—ultimately paid dividends as responders from all levels of government and across responder jurisdictions communicated seamlessly during the bombing incident response.

The Future of Emergency Communications

Importantly, the response to the Boston Marathon bombings illustrated a rapidly changing landscape for emergency communications, one that involves not just traditional land mobile radio use by first responders, but also citizen communications and increased use of broadband or internet technologies. For example:

- The Boston Police Department was able to use alerts and warnings in conjunction with social media like Twitter to communicate with the public.
- Tools, like Google's People Finder, allowed the exchange of information from citizen to citizen.
- The FBI received information through video streams, pictures, and general tips.

- Public Safety Answering Points were able to utilize “Reverse 911” with the general public.

First Responder Network Authority

One of the most exciting of these new entrants into our Nation’s emergency communications landscape is the nationwide public safety broadband network being developed by the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet), and I am honored today to sit next to my fellow panelist, TJ Kennedy, Acting General Manager of FirstNet. OEC supports the DHS role as a board member of FirstNet, an independent authority within the Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration responsible for the development, deployment, and maintenance of a nationwide broadband network for public safety use. Since the establishment of FirstNet in February 2012, OEC has supported FirstNet planning, analysis, and outreach activities including:

- The Public Safety Advisory Committee, originally composed from a subgroup of the SAFECOM program, in its advisory capacity for public safety, state, local, tribal and territorial needs;
- The Cyber Infrastructure Risk Assessment, which will guide cybersecurity and resiliency planning for the nationwide public safety broadband network;
- Nationwide technical assistance and planning support for states, territories, and localities to assist them with preparing for FirstNet consultation in their jurisdictions; and
- The Emergency Communications Preparedness Center, which established a FirstNet Consultation Group to coordinate Federal activities, such as the collection of data related to the needs of Federal users and Federal assets that may be leveraged to deploy the network

The success of FirstNet’s mission is critical for the advancement of emergency communications for first responders, and promises to elevate public safety entities’ ability to execute their duties with cutting edge broadband applications, services, and devices. We are pleased with FirstNet’s progress, and look forward to our ongoing collaboration in the advancement of wireless broadband communications capabilities.

Updated National Emergency Communications Plan

Within the ever-changing emergency communications landscape, including FirstNet and some of the technologies seen during the Boston Marathon bombings, the recently released 2014 National Emergency Communications Plan updates the previous national strategy for successful emergency communications. While designing the updated NECP, OEC conducted more than 30 stakeholder meetings including representatives from the Federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial levels; industry; and representatives from other parts of DHS. To reflect changes in technology and our changing definition of emergency communications, OEC expanded the scope of its outreach by eliciting feedback from public safety answering point personnel, emergency management agencies, and other public safety organizations that had not been included in the initial outreach to inform the 2008 NECP. The updated plan addresses new players who

contribute to emergency communications while continuing to drive the Nation toward the essential planning, coordination, training, and exercise elements.

OEC's outreach plan for updating the NECP was ambitious. OEC's implementation plan for the updated NECP will mirror that ambition. The implementation roadmap for the revised NECP includes updating statewide planning workshops; providing technical assistance; revising Federal Government emergency communications grants guidance; updating the existing state governance structures to bring in necessary players; and transitioning priority services such as Government Emergency Telecommunications Service and Wireless Priority Services to work within a digital or Internet Protocol infrastructure.

Finally, OEC is also focused on ensuring the core, existing communications infrastructure retains its capabilities. Land mobile radio continues to be the most prevalent method for emergency communications throughout much of our Nation. For example, even when FirstNet initially becomes operational for data, land mobile radio will still be needed to provide mission-critical voice until FirstNet can provide this capability.

Conclusion

Thank you, Chairman Brooks, Ranking Member Payne, and the Members of this Committee. At OEC, we will continue to stress the fundamentals of planning, coordination, training, and exercise, through our revised National Emergency Communications Plan and associated activities. This Committee has been an excellent partner in this effort and I look forward to continuing that dialogue. I am pleased to answer any questions that you may have about OEC and our leadership in emergency communications.