

OFFICIAL TESTOMONY

OF

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FOR A HEARING ON

"20 Years After 9/11: Examining Emergency Communications"

BEFORE THE

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Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery
of the House Committee on Homeland Security

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Introduction

Chairwoman Demings and Ranking Member Cammack, thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee today. As Sheriff in rural a rural Florida county, my office faces unique challenges to communicate with our emergency service providers in the field. It is my pleasure to be here with you today and share some of the obstacles we face while we work together to ensure our nation is best equipped to respond to emergent threats and life safety issues.

Emergency communications post 9/11: A rural perspective

Although our Nation has seen significant changes to the way first responders communicate, there are still significant gaps and lapses in coverage areas.

Background: Putnam County is part of rural northeast Florida situated approximately 60 miles south of Jacksonville and North of Daytona Beach. Our county is approximately 827 square miles with a population near 75,000 residents. Putnam County is comprised primarily of farmland and large stands of pine forest harvested for timber. The county is fiscally constrained and designated as a county of critical economic concern by the Florida Legislature. This presents significant challenges to our first responders; not the least of which is emergency communications.

While emergency services in rural areas looks significantly different than it does for our urban counterparts, many things we do look the same. We all apply the same statutes, are held to the same standards by certifying bodies and have similar missions

What does contrast starkly is how we communicate. The majority of our federal, state and local partners use digital P25 based land mobile radio systems. Putnam County is an outlier, in that we currently use an antiquated radio system based on technology developed during World War II. Our current communications platform is an analog VHF radio system primarily assembled from parts of decommissioned systems that were donated from other areas and were otherwise destined for a landfill. This effectively isolates us with no ability to communicate with our counterparts that we frequently work with or rely on for assistance.

Imagine a law enforcement officer and paramedic crew responding to a domestic violence call in a rural area twenty-five to thirty minutes away from your current location. When you arrive, you speak to the victim who is conscious but not ambulatory and has a large laceration above their eye. Based on her description of her injuries, you suspect she may have internal injuries as well. The suspect ran into a densely forested area behind the residence. You try to reach the emergency communications center from your portable radio to request an expedited response from EMS and backup, but get no response. You then attempt to use your cell phone to call, but no luck. Frustrated, you have no choice but to leave the victim in a vulnerable position while you return to your patrol car to use the more powerful mobile radio. The dispatchers can hear you, but your transmission is filled with static and unintelligible. Fortunately, the dispatcher has the foresight to send another deputy to assist, but unfortunately another 20 minutes will elapse before rescue arrives. The victim's condition deteriorates quickly because of the time delay, suffers a stroke and loses her ability to speak and testify against her attacker.

In 2013 the FCC issued a mandate that required analog VHF systems to narrowband or decrease their wavelength from 25 KHZ to 12.5 KHZ to free up additional frequencies. The net effect of that was a greatly reduced ability to transmit or receive radio traffic, especially in buildings or isolated rural areas.

Post 9/11 funding was robust immediately following the attacks, but has waned significantly. For rural communities this funding was significant in assisting emergency communications in receiving vital technology in a timely manner. Larger communities have funded their communications upgrades through their ability to leverage money from an extensive and diverse socio-economic population. Rural communities lack that advantage. The majority of residents in communities like Putnam are older, rely on fixed incomes and do not have the diversity of economic growth seen in areas such as St. Johns or Orange counties. At the same time communities such as Putnam are not so economically stagnant that we receive an overabundance of grant funding. Quite simply we, and other communities similar to ours, are in a financial stranglehold where we have to choose to have the emergency responders to meet the needs of the community, but have the potential to lose signal with communications or pay to update the technology in communications but not have the people to respond to the emergency call.

Currently in Putnam County we are still operating on the Florida interoperability network (FIN) rather than the more up-to-date digital mutual aid model our area counter parts use. FIN is a technology developed that allows public safety partners to patch channels together, effectively creating a bridge that allows radio traffic and data to flow both directions. In the immediate post 9/11 years there was significant emphasis on interoperability which led to development of the FIN. Focus on maintaining this system and others like it has all but grinded to a halt based on use of digital mutual aid channels which has contributed to a lack of maintenance and failure of user agencies to remain proficient in the operation of FIN. Furthermore, FIN use has limitations, the most obvious being user's inability to roam outside of their agency coverage area.

Where do we go from here?

The logical and most cost effective strategy for rural areas is regional communications systems with independent dispatch centers. Multiple users or counties would share these systems within a geographic area and would enable users to roam freely within the coverage area, which reduces cost based on shared infrastructure while still maintaining the autonomy of independent dispatch centers. Regional communications models are not new - there are several well established regional communications systems built nationwide and in Florida. These systems create additional efficiencies; the most notable of which creates a workaround allowing certain transmitters to be optimized for additional coverage, which isn't currently allowed because the FCC mandates transmitters cannot transmit more than five miles outside their intended coverage area. This also can reduce a need to build costly tower sites by leveraging optimized antenna placement versus a need to build additional sites, when transmitters can be tuned accordingly.

Although I am not aware of any current agreements, we do have the ability to use existing infrastructure through internet service provider partnerships which allow leasing of tower space for last-mile efforts to further reduce cost, where feasible. This has the obvious benefit of potentially providing internet service for rural areas not previously afforded access.

Conclusion:

While tremendous progress towards connectivity was made in the two decades since the 9/11 attacks, there still remains a significant amount of work to bridge the communications interoperability gap. In summary, if we are unable to talk and receive messages, we are unable to help those in need during their most critical time.