

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY
OF
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**Before the House Energy & Commerce Committee,
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
“A Legislative Hearing on Seven Communications Bills”
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Chairman Walden, Ranking Member Eshoo, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to speak at today’s hearing. My name is Steve Souder and I am the Director of the Fairfax County Department of 9-1-1/Public Safety Communications. Over the course of more than 50 years in public safety communications, I have served in four public safety communications centers in the National Capitol Region, and have been the director of three. I have also been fortunate to participate in national efforts to improve public safety communications – most recently as the Chair of the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC’s) Task Force on Optimal PSAP Architecture, or TFOPA, which addressed important issues for 9-1-1 such as cybersecurity, architecture, and funding. I am honored to be here today to discuss the important legislation affecting public safety communications before this Subcommittee and to answer any questions you may have.

My remarks focus on H.R. 4167, Kari’s Law, which addresses direct-dial for 9-1-1 in Multi-Line Telephone Systems (MLTS), but of course, I would be happy to share my experience with regard to any other topics.

Everyone is taught that in an emergency, help is only three digits away. “9-1-1” has earned the public’s trust because it’s simple, and it’s reliable for connecting those who need help with the talented professionals who work in 9-1-1 centers. No matter where you are, you expect

that dialing 9-1-1 will work. Unfortunately, depending on where you are today, that might not be enough.

Many of you are familiar with the tragic story of Kari Hunt. Kari Hunt was assaulted by her ex-husband in a small hotel in Texas. Her nine year old daughter – doing exactly what she had been taught to do – dialed 9-1-1 for help. But because the hotel’s phone system required a prefix to make outside calls, her repeated attempts to get help never went through. This is a situation that exists across the country where MLTS is employed, including at hotels, college and corporate campuses, and governmental offices.

Hank Hunt should be commended for his efforts to address this problem, and I’d like to also recognize FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai for joining with him to advocate the hotel industry and MLTS manufacturers to make the changes required to enable direct dial to 9-1-1. Indeed, Commissioner Pai has reported that many national hotel chains have already changed their MLTS to enable direct access to 9-1-1, including their owned and franchised properties. This shows that it is possible to solve this problem with existing MLTS installations.

Kari’s Law, introduced by Representative Gohmert, has bipartisan support and would be an important step in addressing this problem by requiring that all new MLTS be configured by default to directly dial 9-1-1 without requiring any additional digit, code, or prefix. This would be a substantial improvement for 9-1-1 calls from MLTS, and it’s also an opportunity to address important issues such as the delivery of accurate location information.

In addition to direct 9-1-1 access, MLTS have traditionally lacked another key feature – accurate location information. The general public has also come to rightly expect that 9-1-1 professionals will know their location, especially when dialing from landline phones like MLTS.

But MLTS often do not provide the location of the phone itself, but rather the general building or campus address, which may be blocks or many miles away. This leaves the public in danger and public safety answering points (PSAPs) and first responders expending significant resources to locate and provide emergency assistance to the scene. In order to ensure that every caller gets the help they need, every MLTS phone should transmit a dispatchable location, such as the room or office number, so responders can quickly locate the calling party.

Additionally, while the bill eventually makes direct dial the default for new MLTS devices, there would still be a large embedded base of phones that wouldn't support direct 9-1-1 dialing by default. Depending on equipment cycles, these systems may not be replaced for many years, allowing continued consumer confusion and delayed response. Whether a person can direct-dial 9-1-1 should not depend on where he or she is located – such as a hotel room or a dormitory – or how old the phone is. Kari's Law is a great first step, and will hopefully lead to additional efforts to fully solve the 9-1-1 problems associated with MLTS.

Again, I want to thank you for this opportunity to address the Subcommittee and for your work to improve public safety communications. I'd be happy to answer any questions.