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PUBLIC SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2025

House of Representatives,

Subcommittee on Communications

and Technology,

Committee on Energy and Commerce,

Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:17 a.m., in Room 2123, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Richard Hudson [chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Hudson, Allen, Latta, Bilirakis, Carter of Georgia, Dunn, Joyce, Pfluger, Cammack, Obernolte, Houchin, Fry, Kean, Goldman, Fedorchak, Guthrie (Ex Officio), Matsui, Soto, Clarke, Ruiz, Peters, Dingell, Kelly, Barragan, Carter of Louisiana, Menendez, Landsman, McClellan, Castor, and Pallone (ex officio).

Staff Present: Ansley Boylan, Director of Operations; Christian Calvert, Press Assistant; Jessica Donlon, General Counsel; Sydney Greene, Director, Finance and Logistics; Kate Harper, Chief Counsel, Communications & Technology; Megan Jackson, Staff Director; Noah Jackson, Clerk, Communications

& Technology; Sophie Khanahmadi, Deputy Staff Director; John Lin, Senior Counsel, Communications & Technology; Joel Miller, Chief Counsel; Elaina Murphy, Professional Staff Member, Communications & Technology; Dylan Rogers, Professional Staff Member; Jackson Rudden, Staff Assistant; Chris Sarley, Member Services/Stakeholder Director; Matt VanHyfte, Communications Director; Jane Vickers, Press Assistant; Hannah Anton, Minority Policy Analyst; Parul Desai, Minority Staff Director; Waverly Gordon, Minority Deputy Staff Director and General Counsel; Tiffany Guarascio, Minority Staff Director; Dan Miller, Minority Professional Staff Member; Emma Roehrig, Minority Staff Assistant; Michael Scurato, Minority FCC Detailee; Johanna Thomas, Minority Counsel, Communications & Technology; Shae Reinberg, Intern; and Jackson Hall, Intern.

Mr. Hudson. The subcommittee will come to order. The chair will recognize himself for opening statement.

Good morning. Welcome to today's hearing, Public Safety Communications in the United States. Looking forward to hearing from our witnesses about the need for our first responders and how to improve communication -- oh, there it goes. I pushed the wrong button. I think I pushed your button. I don't know what I pushed. Oh, okay. Someone got struck with lightning backstage. But I am looking forward to hearing from our witnesses about the needs of our first responders and how to improve communications for our public safety.

I want to start by taking a moment of personal privilege and recognizing our chief counsel, Kate Harper. Today is her last day working for the committee. We are bittersweet but excited for her. She starts a new job after an incredible career on the Hill, 6 of those years with our great Committee on Energy and Commerce. Kate has a lot to be proud of in her time here, finding a nearly impossible deal for our spectrum auction in this year's reconciliation bill, working on keeping our kids safe from TikTok's Chinese ownership, and finding ways to expand broadband for all Americans. She has been invaluable to the progress and growth of our subcommittee and subcommittee members, myself especially. And I know that I can attribute a lot of my success, probably all of my success as chairman, to her and her hard work. So I am looking forward to seeing her grow in her career and, more importantly, as her family grows. So thank you, Kate, for your wonderful service to this committee. We wish you all the best.

Now I will recognize our ranking member, Ms. Matsui, for as much time as she may consume.

Ms. Matsui. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I also from this side of the aisle very much applaud Kate's efforts and everything else that we have been doing on this committee and, quite frankly, the importance of us all working together on this too.

And I applaud the fact that we have been making progress on certain areas, and I know that

we have you to thank for that. And so service is so important, I believe, for all of us on this committee, and I really believe what we do in this committee really does resound beyond this committee. And we thank all the people who work on this committee in order to do this. So thank you very much, Kate. Really, really, really appreciate it. Thank you.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you for that.

Listen. Communication systems are crucial for our public safety organizations. Our first responders need reliable communications to be able to answer calls for help. We have unfortunately experienced many instances where our public safety communications didn't work, and the consequences were devastating.

During the horrific terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11th, 2001, the anniversary of which is this week, our communications networks were overloaded, resulting in calls being dropped or not going through.

More recently, although significantly improved from 2001, in my home State of North Carolina, we felt the severe impacts from Hurricane Helene's devastation, ultimately preventing people from being able to call 911 and receiving lifesaving care.

These are just two examples of major events where a lack of public safety communication cost hundreds and thousands of lives.

Today's first responder communication landscape looks vastly different than that of 2001. After 9/11, Congress stood up the 9/11 Commission, which released recommendations to prepare for and guard against future attacks. One of those recommendations led to Congress establishing the First Responder Network Authority, or FirstNet, a nationwide broadband network specifically built for public safety.

FirstNet was allocated 20 megahertz of spectrum and $7 billion to build out the networks in all 50 States and territories. In 2017, AT&T was selected to deploy this network, and since then, other providers offer competitive services to serve public safety.

With FirstNet's statutory authority set to expire in 2027, it is time for Congress to assess the progress made by FirstNet to ensure that all requirements are being met and it is adequately serving the needs of our public safety community.

Additionally, our 911 call centers are working to deploy advanced technology known as Next Generation 911. Next Generation 911 is a critical technology upgrade for our first responders, and I have been a longtime supporter of this deployment nationwide.

This internet protocol-based system at our 911 call centers will open the door for advanced tools for both the public and our first responders to use.

NG911-equipped centers are able to receive text messages, photos, and videos to help aid response efforts. This technology also allows for seamless integration of artificial intelligence for cybersecurity purposes and to aid call takers in times of large call volume or provide realtime language transcription or even translation.

Once fully deployed, NG911 will be able to provide specific geolocation data for wireless callers known as "dispatchable location." This accurate location will let first responders know the exact location of a caller automatically instead of just the nearest cell tower.

Similar technologies are also being implemented to transmit vertical location data, which can help first responders locate the exact floor of someone in a high-rise building. Equipping our first responders with this information can improve response times and help saves lives.

Importantly, this technology allows calls to be transferred or rerouted to other call centers in the event a call center is taken offline due to an outage or a natural disaster.

Our public safety and law enforcement officers put their lives on the line every day to help us in our times of need, and we must make sure they have the best tools available to do their jobs. Today, we will hear from our witnesses about the state of public safety communications and whether public safety needs are being met. We will hear about the tools and technologies that are most effective for them to do their job and where improvements can be made.

I look forward to hearing from the witnesses today about these issues and how Congress can stand ready as a partner.

I now recognize the ranking member, the gentlelady from California, for her opening statement.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hudson follows:]

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Ms. Matsui. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Today's hearing is about one of the most critical resources: keeping America safe. Public safety communications are vital to ensure we have round-the-clock warnings to avoid tragedies, such as lives lost and the tens of thousands displaced during this year's California wildfire season or this summer's flash floods in central Texas, the deadliest in almost 49 years. These are not just one-off events. As climate change worsens, extreme weather events are becoming more common and deadly.

Yet, instead of investing in the public communication systems that literally save lives, Republicans are bending the knee as President Trump takes a wrecking ball to our public safety infrastructure. In July, congressional Republicans gave into President Trump's demands to cancel over a billion dollars in funding to local public television and radio stations, public media stations, which reach nearly 99 percent of Americans and can send out emergency alerts even when cellular and internet service are down.

In 2018, Sacramento's KVIE public TV delivered their first ever earthquake early warning in under 3 seconds. This warning system by California public TV stations gives the public critical seconds of notice before shaking begins, allowing people to move to safety, hospitals to protect patients, and operators to secure critical infrastructure.

Yet Republicans chose to defund public media, kneecapping local and especially rural and remote communities' ability to receive lifesaving information.

This isn't just speculation. We are already seeing the consequences play out in real time.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting can no longer administer grants for the next generation warning system, leaving in limbo millions of dollars in funding to upgrade local stations' emergency alert equipment. And thanks to their one big, ugly bill, Republicans have highjacked billions of spectrum auction dollars to fund tax breaks for the wealthy, abandoning past bipartisan plans to use those funds for Next Generation 911 nationwide to update decade-old systems and

provide faster, more accurate emergency responses.

At the same time, the Trump administration is gutting public safety agencies like the National Weather Service. DOGE fired close to 600 National Weather Service staff who were critical to delivering effective forecasting and disaster coordination. In May, the National Weather Service offices in Sacramento and Hanford had to close 24/7 operations because the Trump administration decimated over half their workers.

National Weather Service is not waste or fraud. It is an essential service to ensure Americans to be prepared for and survive natural disasters. Yet the Trump administration continues to dismantle what makes Americans safe. Take FEMA, the lead agency for coordinating Federal disaster response. Before hurricane season, President Trump slashed FEMA's workforce and cancelled billions in disaster preparedness funding. Across the board, where the government is providing service that makes people safer, President Trump has decided it is not worth the cost.

Is that really the legacy my Republican colleagues want to leave behind? The best they have to offer their constituents? We should be investing more resources in our public safety infrastructure, not taking a chainsaw to them. We must restore public media funding, invest in Next Generation 911 nationwide, and fight back against President Trump's public safety cuts. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how we can strengthen public safety communications.

And I do hope we can get back to working on this issue in a common bipartisan way, instead of standing by as this administration cripples our public safety and disaster preparedness.

And with that, I yield the balance of my time.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Matsui follows:]

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Mr. Hudson. I thank the gentlelady.

I now recognize the chairman of the full committee, the gentleman from Kentucky, for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

The Chair. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for bringing us together for this important hearing. Thanks to all of our witnesses for being here.

As you know, we are here in the wake of the tragic floods of Texas. And our hearts have been heavy for Representative Pfluger, who sits next to me, and Representative Carter, who had children and grandchildren at the camp who are, fortunately, okay. But they lost friends. And Representative Carter's grandchildren lost their cousin on the other side of his family. And it is just a heart-wrenching time, and our prayers are still out for these families. And it is just -- but this tragedy highlights the importance of the hearing we have today and the communication infrastructure that we need in desperate moments like these.

We may take 911 for granted. As a matter of fact, if anybody has ever heard Robert Aderholt say this, in 1968, the first 911 call was placed in Haleyville, Alabama. I am not sure why Haleyville, Alabama, chose to be the first place to do it, but they did. And, before that, you had to look up the police -- the sheriff or the police officer or the hospital number in a phone book, those of us old enough to remember phone books. And now the single three-digit number improves the response times and saves lives. So I think Robert was 2 or 3 years old. So think of how far the world has come in Robert Aderholt's lifetime. And it just -- not that long ago. I mean, I know he is a little older than he wants to be, but it is not that long ago that we really had -- that this was implemented.

So, since that first call, the technology has really changed, but it is changing exponentially now. Next Generation 911 is becoming more common at call centers around the country, which means faster and more prepared emergency responses, including enhanced location accuracy. I remember, when I first got here, we were talking about -- this is the first time that somebody in a

hotel room's mom -- domestic abuse -- and a child called -- knew to call 911. And they were little but couldn't tell them which room they were in. So the police showed up to a hotel, but they didn't have any idea which room to go to. So I know that is get even better with this type of -- where we are with Next Generation.

So, regardless of what type of technology would service -- providers, first responders use, it is critical that their communication tools work reliably in the moment of need. My home State of Kentucky has dealt with flooding and tornadoes in recent months, and my district dealt with the same just a few years ago, including my neighbors behind me. The tornado missed my house by about 100 yards. And so I have seen firsthand how access to reliable communications and having first responders that show up when you need it is extremely, extremely important, and it helps those in need.

But, before I wrap up, I had to take a second to thank Kate Harper -- Kate O'Connor Harper -- Harper as well. She has been an invaluable member of the team, always pleasant, always -- and one of the smartest people you will deal with in this -- maybe in all the spaces but certainly in telecommunications and has just been a pleasure to work with.

My daughter has moved to Chicago. So I always enjoy her Chicago accent. And the fact that she is going to work for a company -- I don't know if we can say or not -- but the company that has a hard O and a hard A in the title, it is fun to hear her say where she is going to work.

So anyway, thanks a lot. Godspeed. And you mean a lot to this committee, and I look forward to working with you in your new endeavor.

And, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

[The prepared statement of The Chair follows:]

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Mr. Hudson. I thank the gentleman.

I now recognize the gentleman from New Jersey, the ranking member, for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

Mr. Pallone. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

At a time when our Nation is facing more and more devastating extreme weather events, from wildfires to hurricanes to flooding, it is critical that Congress do more to keep first responders connected and our communities informed. The Energy and Commerce Committee has a long history of supporting emergency communications systems and the first responders who rely on them day in and day out to keep our communications safe.

Unfortunately, the Republican majority has jammed through bills that abandon first responders and the safety of our communities. The Republicans' big, ugly bill reinstated the Federal Communications Commission spectrum auction authority without any plan to ensure that auction proceeds will fund priorities that serve the public interest. In fact, my Republican colleagues abandoned a bipartisan agreement that was unanimously passed out of the full committee last Congress to fully fund the deployment of Next Generation 911 across the country, using those revenues raised from spectrum auctions.

Many of Americans' emergency communications centers rely on outdated infrastructure and technologies from half a century ago. This makes them less effective in dispatching timely emergency response and leaves them dangerously vulnerable to cyber attacks. It is long past time to address this problem. The Senate devoting just a fraction of the big, ugly bill's nearly 90 billion in spectrum auction revenues to modernize our public safety communication systems, Republicans made a conscious choice that tax breaks for billionaires and big corporations are a more deserving cause, and I completely disagree.

Next Generation 911 is a critical public safety initiative that will save countless lives. NG911 will allow Americans to call and send texts, images, or videos to 911 to help first responders and

emergency personnel better assess emergencies and assist people in need. It will reduce response times and equip first responders with lifesaving information before they arrive at the scene. And these funds would save lives, but Republicans walked away from the agreement to invest in this program with their big ugly bill. And I think it is a betrayal of our Nation's first responders and 911 dispatchers.

In another bill to public safety, congressional Republicans and President Trump stripped away billions of dollars in promised funding to public broadcasters who play a vital role keeping communities informed during times of emergency. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting will now close its doors by the end of this month, and the public stations it served are already staring down the negative consequences of Republicans' actions. Look no further than the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Next Generation Warning System Grant Program, which was administered by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. It provided funding to public media to keep communities informed during disasters, like during the recent floods in Texas and during hurricanes last year in Florida and western North Carolina. Since the funding rescission, the program's future is in serious jeopardy, threatening public stations' access to funding to upgrade and maintain emergency alert systems.

And this committee's work to improve public safety communications' capabilities has traditionally been a bipartisan endeavor, and it should be. But it is impossible to ignore the near constant damage our Republican colleagues inflict on institutions that serve the public interest. It is our job to ensure first responders have the tools they need to communicate and that broadcasters are equipped to keep the public informed. And these senseless cuts make their jobs harder, not easier.

So I hope we can reverse course and get back to work in a bipartisan way to pass real solutions to make our public safety communications systems faster, more reliable, and more secure for the benefit of all Americans.

We should be working together to pass and fully fund the Next Generation 911 program. But we also have to come together to address the looming sunset of the First Responder Network Authority, or FirstNet, to ensure that first responders do not lose access to this vital communications network and the capabilities that it provides. Public safety organizations representing law enforcement, fire, emergency medical services, and local authorities have called on Congress to pass legislation to preserve FirstNet's authority to operate beyond the sunset date. And it is critical that we act on that as well.

So, again, Mr. Chairman, I look forward to the discussion. I yield back the balance of my time. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Pallone follows:]

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Mr. Hudson. I thank the gentleman.

We have now concluded with member opening statements. The chair reminds members that, pursuant to the committee rules, all members' opening statements will be made part of the record.

I would like to again thank our witnesses for being here today to testify before this subcommittee. Our witnesses will have 5 minutes each to provide an opening statement, which will be followed by a round of questions from members.

The witnesses here before us today are Mr. Steve Newton, Emergency Management Director from Chatham County, North Carolina, Emergency Management; sheriff Shannon Dicus from San Bernardino County -- tells me that is the largest county in America; thank you, sheriff; Dr. Brian Fontes, former Chief Executive Officer from the National Emergency Number Association; and Mr. Randall C. Wright, Executive Director of Florida Public Radio Emergency Network and Project BEACON. Thank you all again.

Mr. Newton, you are recognized for 5 minutes for your opening statement.

STATEMENTS OF STEVE NEWTON, EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT DIRECTOR, CHATHAM COUNTY EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT; SHERIFF SHANNON DICUS, SAN BERNADINO COUNTY; BRIAN FONTES, FORMER CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, NATIONAL EMERGENCY NUMBER ASSOCIATION; AND RANDALL C. WRIGHT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WUFT/WRUF, FLORIDA PUBLIC RADIO EMERGENCY NETWORK, AND PROJECT BEACON.

STATEMENT OF STEVE NEWTON

Mr. Newton. Thank you, Chairman Hudson, ranking member Matsui, and distinguished members of the subcommittee.

My name is Steve Newton. I am the Emergency Management Director of Chatham County, North Carolina. I also serve as the vice chair of the Statewide Interoperability Executive Committee. I welcome the opportunity to discuss public safety communications as they exist today in the United States.

The ability for public safety leaders and responders to communicate is never more essential than the days immediately before and immediately following a disaster. We depend on communications pathways from government to government, government to the public, and public to the public. When any of these pathways fails, there are dire consequences.

In many cases, the ability to communicate may help us prevent a disaster from becoming a catastrophe. Widespread and sustained inoperable cellular networks, land mobile radio systems, and 911 call routing create an exceptionally difficult operating environment in which incident commanders and responders aren't aware of changing conditions, can't adequately plan and request resources, can't effectively direct response activities, alert the public, or protect frontline personnel.

Over the last 32 years, I have participated in the response to 21 federally declared disasters

across North Carolina, Louisiana, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and South Carolina. Most recently, I responded to Hurricane Helene in western North Carolina and directed the response to Tropical Storm Chantal in my own jurisdiction. Of those disasters, three stand out for their impact to public safety communications.

First was in 2005 at St. Tammany Parrish in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. And the common theme that you will hear: wind, torrential rain, and flooding. In this case, storm surge resulted in loss of life, damage to homes, damage to 911 centers. And I will fluctuate between calling it a 911 center, a comm center, a PSAP, or a public safety answering point. Please forgive me. Our emergency response facilities were affected, public works yards, communications tower, wired and wireless internet, and telephony.

In Louisiana, two 911 centers were offline for more than 30 days. For the first week after impact, we had no call routing. So 911 calls were either abandoned or were not consistently routed. Some were answered. Some just did not go through.

Even after 10 days, some manual call routing could occur, and they went to 10-digit lines. And what you get with a ten-digit standard telephone line is you get a voice but you don't get any of the additional data, locations, anything like that.

In 2017, I responded to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. The day after landfall, on September 20th, 95 percent of their cell phones were out of service. And that is a combination -- and again, you will hear common themes today. It was a combination of damage to fiberoptic backhaul and transport lines, and then certainly into the days and weeks and months that followed, it was interruption of the power supply.

Due to limited communications, our team -- we broke up into several teams. I was given the area around San Juan and six municipalities, or counties, in Puerto Rico. We spent 3 days going from municipality to municipality to try to locate local leaders to just understand what they were facing, understand what the dire needs were that we could work on today.

And these needs -- and I -- 3 weeks out. These needs included oxygen, water, food. And, again, we had to drive around with a piece of paper and try to find these folks.

Ultimately, it would take 11 months to restore 100 percent of the power on the island, the longest power outage in U.S. history that I am aware of.

In 2024, I responded to western North Carolina after Hurricane Helene. Again, wind, torrential rain, flooding. In this case, landslides did the same damage -- damaged infrastructure, damaged homes, loss of life. Over 1,700 miles of fiberoptic cable were destroyed. Nineteen PSAPs were taken offline where they could not receive a 911 call directly.

In our case, 74 percent of cell sites were out of service across the region. Again, the result -- a result of fiberoptic transport lines being cut, the result of power outages and inaccessibility.

Hurricane Helene represented some of the most complex communications challenges I have ever faced as a professional.

I will leave you with the successes for us. The North Carolina 911's Board's statewide Emergency Services IP Network, the ESInet, meant that of those 19 PSAPs, their calls were routed to a backup PSAP. So, if a call made it to the system, it was answered.

Our State Highway Patrol's VIPER land mobile radio system processed 3 million calls.

And then, finally, our partnership that coordinated repairs, deployables, and broadband internet to bring us back online. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Newton follows:]

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Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

Sheriff, you have 5 minutes for your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF SHERIFF SHANNON DICUS

Sheriff Dicus. Chairman Hudson and Ranking Member Matsui and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, and thank you for all of your continued leadership on advancing Next Gen 911.

My name is Shannon Dicus, and I serve as the sheriff of San Bernardino County, California. I am testifying on behalf of Major County Sheriffs of America, an association representing sheriffs' offices that collectively serve more than 110 million people in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Sheriffs' offices cover entire counties, which means we oversee both city and unincorporated areas, critical infrastructure, and remote rural regions. We respond to a wide range of emergencies to coordinate daily with Federal agencies, State, and local partners, fire service, and emergency medical service.

We also operate some of the Nation's largest 911 centers. Many smaller agencies in our regions rely on us for communication support. So, when systems are disrupted, the impact is broad. For this region -- for this reason, emergency communications remain one of our highest priorities.

We have seen why this work matters. When central Texas was hit with severe flooding this summer, many residents reported late or missing warnings. Those delays cost precious time. That is why modern, interoperable systems like Next Generation 911 are essential. They ensure alerts reach people quickly across multiple technical platforms and give responders better situational awareness.

We also know firsthand how cyber incidents can disrupt emergency response. In 2023, San

Bernardino County Sheriff's Department experienced a ransomware attack that took our computer-aided dispatch offline and forced deputies to rely on handheld radios and manual processes. While we restored operations, the event underscored how vulnerable local systems can be and why consistent Federal cybersecurity standards and resources are so important.

So, today, I respectfully ask that Congress take four key steps.

The first: pass legislation to upgrade American to true Next Gen 911 capabilities with an emphasis on cybersecurity, resiliency, and realtime data.

Number two: fund these essential upgrades to ensure consistent service in both urban and rural areas.

Number three: remove the sunset provision on the FirstNet authority, allowing continued reinvestment of program revenues into network improvements without taxpayer dollars.

And number four: establish Federal cybersecurity standards to help public safety agencies protect against growing digital threats.

In San Bernardino County, which spans 20,000 square miles and serves more than 2 million residents, we have worked to modernize our systems. We are among the first in California to deploy texts to 911 and have since expanded to full Next Generation 911 with geo-diverse call routing and improved interoperability. These improvements have strengthened our response through connectivity gaps. However, vulnerabilities still remain.

FirstNet has also been a valuable addition. California's decision to opt in brought five new FirstNet towers to our county. The FirstNet authority has committed 2 billion nationwide to reinvest and fund in the program itself rather than funding by taxpayers. To maintain that progress, Congress must extend FirstNet's authorization beyond 2027.

Finally, I want to highlight the importance of our public safety communicators, the professionals who answer our 911 calls. Reclassifying them under the 911 SAVES Act will ensure they receive the training and support and resources that they need.

Mr. Chairman and members, our request is straightforward: continue building on systems that are working, strengthen cybersecurity protections, and provide the resources necessary to ensure that every community has access to modern, reliable emergency communications.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to all of your questions.

[The prepared statement of Sheriff Dicus follows:]

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Mr. Hudson. Thank you, Sheriff.

Dr. Fontes, you are recognized for 5 minutes for your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF BRIAN FONTES

Dr. Fontes. Thank you very much, Chairman Hudson, Ranking Member Matsui, and members of the subcommittee. I am honored to be here today.

My goal is really rather simple. I have two of them. The first is to ask Congress to enact legislation to reclassify the dedicated 911 professionals as true public safety professionals and to fully fund the deployment of Next Generation 911. I echo the comments of my colleagues.

Currently, 911 professionals are classified as administrative or secretarial, similar to receptionists and secretaries, rather than protective service. And it is with this protective service that includes police and fire. It should also include 911 professionals. This misclassification is a relic of legacy 911 last century, Haleyville, Alabama, when I was a senior in high school, when the first public 911 call was made.

Today, 911 professionals do so much more. They handle medical triage, provide crucial situational awareness for our emergency response teams, and they undergo rigorous training in the various medical protocols, technologies, and procedures that must be followed.

Representative Torres, a former 911 professional, and Representative Fitzpatrick, along with Senators Blackburn and Klobuchar, have long championed the 911 SAVES Act. This zero-cost bill would reclassify 911 telecommunicators, or professionals, as I call them, for what they are, true public safety professionals. They are key components to the emergency response team. As such, they deserve to be recognized alongside their public safety colleagues.

The next issue: funding is urgently needed for Next Generation 911. 911 is often the first point of contact between citizens and emergency first responders or field responders. Yet many of

our Nation's 911 systems are rooted in last century voice-centric technology. Nearly 90 percent of the 911 calls today originate from smartphone devices, broadband-capable devices. But legacy 911 systems are not designed to receive data or to process data, videos, texts, or other important information relevant to that specific emergency.

The answer is simple. Next Generation 911 is a suite of standards-based technologies that will fully modernize the 911 systems with information-rich data, enhanced cybersecurity, redundancy, and resiliency. We have heard this already. And this will inevitably protect the public in a more efficient manner. It allows 911 centers to push and pull data between and among senders themselves.

But NG911 only works if 911 centers across the Nation can acquire necessary technologies -- transitions costs -- moving from legacy 911 systems to Next Generation 911 systems adds financial strain to local communities, tribal lands, and States. The sooner NG911 can be deployed, the sooner these expensive to maintain, last-century legacy systems can be phased out.

We saw the potential of NG911 in North Carolina with Hurricane Helene. Centers using emergency service IP networks, or ESI nets or SE nets, a key component in the building blocks for Next Generation 911, enable a variety of things to occur such as geofencing affected areas and routing calls to other centers that were not affected by the hurricane. But ESI nets alone are not enough. Until the entire country is fully deployed in Next Generation 911, no State, regardless of its investment, will fully realize the maximum benefits of Next Generation 911.

In 2012, Congress authorized a study to determine the cost to fully transition to Next Generation 911. That study was completed in 2018. And, adjusted for today's dollars, the value of that estimated -- and there was a range between roughly 9 and $13 billion -- but that, if you were adjusting it for today's dollars, you would be closer to $15 billion.

Waiting for another cost study or analysis to be completed is not necessarily the answer. And, in fact, it could turn out to be a delay, such as the 6-year study before. The answer is to fund

Next Generation 911.

I want to thank Chairman Hudson, Vice Chairman Allen, Ranking Members Pallone and Matsui for their bipartisan support of Next Generation 911 funding during the markup of the reconciliation bill and previous statements.

I urge Congress to establish consistent funding stream that can be accessed easily and efficiently by State and local governments for the deployment of Next Generation 911.

In January of 2024, nine former FCC Chairs, both Republicans and Democratic administrations, sent a letter to Congress underscoring the need to fully fund Next Generation 911. I believe that was the first time in the history of the FCC that nine former Chairmen agreed to the common issue of funding -- in this case, Next Generation 911.

Unfortunately, everybody in this room will likely end up calling 911 at some point in their life. I would hope that we would provide them, your constituents, all of us, the best 911 service in America.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Fontes follows:]

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Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

Mr. Wright, you are recognized for 5 minutes for your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF RANDALL C. WRIGHT

Mr. Wright. Thank you. Good morning, Chairman Hudson, Ranking Member Matsui, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. I am Randy Wright, executive director of the media properties at the University of Florida and general manager of WUFT, which are noncommercial public radio and television stations. Our mission at WUFT and the University of Florida extends across the State of Florida but also the State of South Carolina through transformative public safety initiatives, Florida public radio emergency network, and a new initiative called BEACON, which is an --

Mr. Goldman. Mr. Wright, your microphone is not on.

Mr. Wright. You know, you would think -- you would think, starting in radio at the age of 14 -- right?

Mr. Goldman. We can hear your voice fine, but that was --

Mr. Wright. But let's do it with the mike on. Should I start over or continue?

Mr. Hudson. Continue.

Mr. Wright. Just continue. Okay. I apologize for that.

We have recently launched the new AI-driven initiative in Florida called BEACON, and we have done this in partnership with the Florida Division of Emergency Management and executive director Kevin Guthrie.

WUFT and my colleagues in Florida and South Carolina are among 1,300 public radio and 360 public television stations that form America's public safety communications infrastructure. These stations reach our entire Nation with reliable emergency alerting services in a noncommercial environment that is free of sensationalism. This public media technical infrastructure forms the

backbone of our Nation's alerting capabilities.

The public radio satellite system connects all of these stations, enabling immediate national emergency alerts to be shared on the most resilient medium, which is over-the-air radio.

Many people aren't aware that the PBS WARN system serves as one of only two conduits to the Nation for our wireless emergency alerts. This critical broadcast infrastructure serves as the last mile for public safety and emergency alerts to reach Americans, and that must be protected.

WUFT's FPREN, or Florida Public Radio Emergency Network, launched in 2013, really exemplifies public media's power in crisis, and it relies heavily on the power and reach of broadcast transmission. FPREN, which serves every public radio and television station in Florida and in South Carolina, doesn't merely respond to disasters. Our team, working in collaboration with our public media partners, anticipates these disasters. Before Hurricane Milton arrived last year, FPREN was already mobilizing, delivering active updates in English and Spanish across both States of Florida and South Carolina. When the power failed, cellular and internet service were lost, FPREN came through loud and clear, through public radio transmitters providing critically important updates during and following that crisis.

The University of Florida, as one of the Nation's leading public land grant institutions, has pioneered technologies that truly transform public broadcasting infrastructure into community lifelines.

WUFT provides the only consistent local news source for much of north Florida, including rural areas with no other news outlets. This journalistic depth powers our position as a lifeline for fact-based public safety and emergency information that saves lives and property in partnership with emergency management agencies statewide.

UF is truly a hotbed for a variety of public safety initiatives, including a current effort with AT&T FirstNet to develop safer places, which allows our University of Florida research teams and law enforcement to advance solutions to better protect against situations like active assailants.

There is absolutely no greater calling than the safety of our Nation, and UF and WUFT continue to lead in partnership with and alongside local, State, and Federal agencies.

Now, WUFT, as I mentioned, just developed BEACON within the last 2 years. This is a revolutionary 24-hour, always-on alerting channel that utilizes artificial intelligence to continuously and immediately broadcast only official public safety alerts. BEACON broadcasts on dedicated public radio frequencies. It streams online, and it reaches mobile devices through the BEACON app. Serving communities in multiple languages, BEACON provides a commercial and news-free sanctuary where nothing but those official alerts get out without distraction.

Developed in coordination and partnership with the Florida Division of Emergency Management, WUFT and the University of Florida have already established numerous BEACON stations across Florida, representing America's and, quite frankly, the world's first comprehensive alerting channel, with more BEACON sites to launch in the weeks to come.

Local emergency management leaders at the county level, like Jen Grice in Alachua County, Florida, John Schultz in Lee County, Florida, have fully embraced BEACON, along with other county-level leaders already incorporating the solution into their community engagement strategies.

This marriage of FPREN and BEACON creates a comprehensive solution delivering trusted coverage alongside official alerts directly from emergency management agencies.

What this means is that these are solutions that serve all Americans -- urban or rural, rich or poor -- with comprehensive immediate and ongoing alerting. With the recent rescission of Federal funding support for public broadcasting, which directly impacts this infrastructure that is so critical to the alerting last mile, we urge Congress to find new pathways of support for these critical services and for innovative solutions like FPREN and BEACON.

Public media's infrastructure represents an irreplaceable national asset for emergency communications, particularly serving rural and underserved communities where alternatives are prohibitively expensive.

In the public broadcasting sphere, we are very proud and consider ourselves to be a utility for the American people -- a must-have, not a nice-to-have. Public broadcasting and our infrastructure truly consist -- become America's alerting first responders. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Wright follows:]

******** COMMITTEE INSERT ********

Mr. Hudson. Thank you, Mr. Wright.

We will now begin a period of questions from members. I will recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Mr. Newton, thank you for being here today. You talked about 2024, Hurricane Helene tore through western North Carolina, causing widespread damage and more than 100 fatalities. Understand a significant portion of the communications infrastructure was destroyed, per your testimony, and several of the call centers -- the 19 call centers were out of commission. Can you talk about how North Carolina's statewide Next Generation 911 system helped public safety officials respond to this disaster?

Mr. Newton. Thank you for the question.

The 19 PSAPs that were taken offline -- because of fiber line cuts, primarily -- were able to be rerouted. And so because the calls are managed from a digital level on this ESInet that we have statewide with all 124 PSAPs, that if their normal call rerouting plan isn't appropriate because of call volume and things like that, the Network Management Center, operation center, the NMC, is able to then reprovision and turn those calls to another 911 center that is not impacted.

In fact, one of the communities that was impacted, Mitchell County -- I believe it is Mitchell -- we received calls for them for 30 days after the event, which means that -- I call 911 from western North Carolina. I get help from a trained, equipped professional. And then that call itself -- and I need fire, I need EMS, I need police -- is able to be routed back to somebody who actually dispatches it.

Mr. Hudson. That is amazing.

You know, Next Generation 911, as has been said by several witnesses, is the next critical step in improving our Nation's public safety communication system. It will allow for more advanced types of communications, as you have mentioned, increase interoperability, like the example you gave, and increase cybersecurity. However, these systems are complex and require careful

planning and expertise for implementation.

Dr. Fontes, how can Congress be an effective partner in ensuring the success -- successful nationwide deployment of Next Generation 911 technology?

Dr. Fontes. Thank you.

I think first and foremost is to provide the funding necessary to transition to Next Generation 911. Communities across the country, while maintaining legacy systems at their cost, also are beginning or need to begin making the investment to Next Generation 911. It is a costly endeavor. And the longer the timeframe between the legacy 911 system sunsetting and the deployment of Next Generation 911, the greater the cost is going to be to the community.

So the easiest, the quickest -- and I say "quickest" not to give any false impression that it is going to be an overnight activity -- but, if the dollars were there, the planning and the completion of those that already began their plans can take place to ensure that our Nation has the best available Next Generation 911 systems.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you for that.

Sheriff Dicus, San Bernardino County, as you said, is more than 20,000 square miles and geographically very diverse, including urban density, national forests, Mojave Desert. Does just one communication service or technology reach every part of your jurisdiction? And, if not, how does your department handle that and ensure that you have got maximum communication across the county?

Sheriff Dicus. Chairman, that is an excellent question.

So it is really a combination of multiple systems. So, for instance, in our computer, in terms of answering calls for deputy sheriffs, we run two communication cards. One is FirstNet, and the other is a Verizon card. And the reason is, is coverage for a county that vast -- I mean, it takes 4 and a half hours to drive across. And then, of course, our legacy 800 megahertz systems, which really is the backbone that we depend on, having the ability for a deputy to get on a radio or get on a cell

phone and accomplish the tasks that they have been asked to do.

Mr. Hudson. Appreciate that.

This question, I guess, would be for anybody here, but what -- it is sort of a -- build on what I asked Dr. Fontes. I understand funding is an issue, but are there other things Congress can do to sort of help cut through and make this nationwide deployment possible? Are there other issues out there that we need to resolve or intervene on behalf of that you can think of? I would open that to any of the witnesses.

Sheriff Dicus. I will take it, Chairman.

It has been my own experience -- governance and policy issues, when you are talking about critical infrastructure that is replacing across the country, especially when you are going through different jurisdictions that obviously have different policies and different governance, creating a national standard so that you can overcome those types of obstructions, making sure we are able to build out that critical infrastructure so that we can all communicate across the boards is what I would say is really important for this group to take a look at and provide that consistency and that platform for the buildout for all the States.

Mr. Hudson. All right.

Dr. Fontes. I would like to add to that. The obvious importance, of course, is planning. And so I think it is important that, if funding were made available, it is important to recognize how that funding is made available. Is it something that you do on an incremental basis? A first tranche of funding for planning and early rollout? A second tranche of funding for the deployment? And, of course, the final tranche for completion.

So I am asking that Congress can be creative in how they fund Next Generation 911. The governance aspect is vitally important. You want to make sure that, however funds are available, that those funds work within the processes, the procedures, that State 911 administrators and local governments actually have in place in order to utilize the funding that would be available for the

purpose of deploying Next Generation 911.

Mr. Hudson. Great. I appreciate that.

At this time, I will recognize our ranking member, the gentlelady from California, for 5 minutes for her questions.

Ms. Matsui. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

California public broadcasting stations like Sacramento's KVIE play a critical role in public safety, from providing wildfire outbreak alerts to delivering early earthquake warnings within seconds. This summer, President Trump and congressional Republicans gutted more than $1 billion in funding to our local public television and radio stations, funding that our local stations rely on to provide a failsafe path for Americans to receive lifesaving emergency alerts, warnings, and evacuation routes.

Mr. Wright, I think you agree what we need is public funding. It is really critical for public safety. And -- I say this too, but can private, for-profit networks sufficiently place public media's role in public safety communications?

Mr. Wright. Thank you, Congresswoman. I appreciate your question.

You know, I think that public broadcasting, to start with, is very unique in our media ecosphere here in the country. The rescission has had profound impacts already in terms of local services that stations like yours in Sacramento have been able to make but now may be having to cut.

I think the unique advantages that the public broadcasting infrastructure brings to bear are what we need to focus on. And some of those are we have a unified approach; we have a system that reaches the entire country. We have a culture that is built around public safety and public service. It is not a profit motive that is incorporated into our DNA. Our DNA and our culture is built around public safety and public service.

So do I think that we are uniquely qualified with the investment that the American people

have made through the decades to really take advantage of this infrastructure? To enhance public safety? To enhance service to the American people? I think the future belongs to public broadcasting when it comes to creating these public safety solutions.

Ms. Matsui. Right. I agree with you there.

This committee played a pivotal role in standing up the nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network, or FirstNet. I have long advocated for a strong effective governance over FirstNet as it holds significant responsibility over the use of highly valuable spectrum and public funding.

Dr. Fontes, is FirstNet solving public safety communications needs? If you had a power to fund additional public safety priorities, what would you focus on, and how much might it cost?

Dr. Fontes. Yes. Going back -- thank you for that question, actually. I am going back now several years.

Public --

Ms. Matsui. Not too far back now because we don't have much time here.

Dr. Fontes. I know. Believe me.

The fact of the matter is public safety did not have access to a nationwide public safety broadband network. Now, we call this FirstNet, or the FirstNet authority that oversees this public safety broadband network. I am not here to say that that network should be sunsetted. What I am saying is that network does provide a service. What I do believe, however, is that when you are considering the reauthorization of FirstNet, that you take a look at all of the ways that have -- or issues that have been identified by inspector general's reports regarding the authorities' oversight of that.

I also believe that we are now in a world of competition in public safety broadband networks. We didn't have that in 2012. So --

Ms. Matsui. Okay.

Dr. Fontes. -- we have companies like Verizon or T-Mobile or others coming online that

provides opportunities for public safety to utilize broadband networks.

I believe that public safety is best served when they are in control and they are capable of making decisions as to what network --

Ms. Matsui. Okay. I want to ask Sheriff Dicus, as this committee addresses FirstNet reauthorization, how can we best strengthen our first responders' access to reliable, resilient, and dedicated communication systems?

Sheriff Dicus. Ranking Member, it is certainly my opinion -- and I have experienced this firsthand in a county that is as large as San Bernardino -- the buildout of FirstNet is critical, and the reason being is -- I always explain it is what is in the dirt that supports us. So we talked about fiber, and some of my colleagues up here. There is a lot of these things that are not in the ground, but yet we still respond to critical infrastructure. And, in my county, we are talking about rare earth minerals and things as you spread out to the unpopulated areas of the county that could still potentially be attacked. So the buildout of FirstNet to provide that priority broadband system to be able to move that information is critically important.

Also, there are layers of this, and the layers look something like not just getting the call to the first responder but managing it, getting him the best intelligence, being able to transfer pictures, being able to transfer audio where a lot of drone technology is coming into public safety right now, being able to do realtime video. And it takes a broadband network to be able to transfer modern types of communications.

Ms. Matsui. Okay. Thank you very much. And I have run out of time, so I yield.

Mr. Hudson. I thank the gentlelady.

I will recognize the chairman of the full committee, Mr. Guthrie, for your questions for 5 minutes.

The Chair. Thank you.

I want to start with the sheriff. In Kentucky, we have 120 counties, and in the -- our

founding fathers decided they wanted a county seat within a horse -- a day's horseback ride you can go back and forth. So we have a lot of counties. So I remember driving to -- from Nevada to Las Vegas, and I looked at my wife and said -- about 3 hours into our drive, "We have been in one county the whole time." We were in San Bernardino County. So it is good you are here because you have a perspective of an urban area and broad spaces and wide open spaces in the hottest place -- Needles, California, the hottest city in America, or something like that, if I remember?

So here we are talking about FirstNet, and that is what is important. And it was created in 2012, expires in 2027, so we have to -- so Sheriff Dicus, with your experience -- and I know you have talked about it in your opening statement, some questions, but just as a user of FirstNet, what do you think we need to do different in this reauthorization that makes your job easier or better? We can serve your citizens better?

Sheriff Dicus. Well, certainly, fund it, and then continue to expand it. There are still a lot of rural areas across this country that are not covered, and having a priority-type broadband system only for public safety with preemptive technologies too -- where if the traffic gets too much, say there is a disaster somewhere else, they can move to make sure that that specific agency or jurisdiction has priority within the system.

And I think, with AI, there are still so many things to come technically, having a robust broadband network to be able to ingest whatever types of new communications we are going to receive is critically important to moving public safety forward and managing major critical --

The Chair. So, due to the size of your county -- I don't know how many counties California has, but your county is large, as we described. You use multiple service providers across your county, right? I know that is probably necessary. And does it affect your ability to do your job by having different service providers in your own jurisdiction?

Sheriff Dicus. So, in the past, in my day on patrol, absolutely it did. You actually had to be aware of where your radios -- how far they reached -- phones and things of that nature. So you had

to manually change the radios. Now, with modern technology, the computer actually switches between which service provider has the most signal strength, and same thing with our radio systems.

But even the manual radio systems have advanced in technology to know whether or not a deputy sheriff or a law enforcement officer may be lying on the ground versus standing straight up. So the data you are getting in terms of intelligence on the call is really second to none. And making sure we posture ourselves for that in the remote places like Needles is critically important.

The Chair. The world's largest thermometer, right?

So the -- so your ability to do your job, the technology has compensated for the fact you have multiple providers in your jurisdiction, so --

Sheriff Dicus. It certainly has helped. Yes.

The Chair. Okay. Thanks.

And, also, unfortunately, we have seen cyber attacks disrupt 911 systems and dispatch centers. So, Sheriff and Mr. Newton, the question -- from your perspective, what more can the Federal Government do to help local law enforcement and public safety agencies strengthen their cybersecurity?

Sheriff Dicus. As I mentioned in my opening, we have experienced a cyber attack. And, as a sheriff, all of a sudden you have these conflicting issues, and number one is talking about maybe some governance or policies that relates to cybersecurity insurance for counties like mine. And the reason being is they bring in expertise to be able to manage those and get you -- your systems back up.

But talking about our computer automated dispatch system, it took us down. Most sheriffs, for all of you, a lot of our local agencies rely on our backbone. So we talk about security switches; in our case, California law enforcement telecommunication system. Even though we still had voice technology to communicate to the cops on the radio, think about being able to get warrants processed. You could be out with a dangerous felon and not get it.

So absolutely 100 percent critical to keep this moving forward and look at things outside of not just the technology but also support in how to get it quickly.

The Chair. Okay. Mr. Newton, how can Federal Government help in cybersecurity situations?

Mr. Newton. I think expanding the work that we already do, the collaborations with the FBI and CISA, the Cybersecurity Infrastructure Security Agency, the common theme of reliable funding, what we see, we had a very similar experience as the sheriff in our community in which it is a continuity event for us. Our ability to do mission-essential functions is interfered with. And so our ability to, you know, bring in resources and how do we keep -- how do we stay in the business of providing government services during these events.

And then I think continuation of vulnerability assessments, of looking at -- it is a big patchwork quilt across this country. And especially in the world of cybersecurity, we have got to invest the time and effort into, where do we stand? Where do we need to be? How do we get better?

The Chair. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. I thank the chairman.

The chair now recognizes the ranking member of the full committee, Mr. Pallone, for your 5 minutes of questions.

RPTR SINKFIELD

EDTR ZAMORA

[11:15 a.m.]

Mr. Hudson. I thank the chairman.

The chair now recognizes the ranking member of the full committee, Mr. Pallone, for your 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. Pallone. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

For more than a decade, this committee has worked to pass legislation to upgrade communication systems in 9-1-1 centers around the country, and it is a bipartisan endeavor that will improve emergency response and save lives. And that is why I was so disappointed that my Republican colleagues passed the Big Ugly Bill without any plan to use the proceeds from spectrum auctions for programs that serve the public interest like Next Generation 9-1-1.

So I have two questions, Mr. Fontes. Mr. Fontes, you have been a strong advocate for using spectrum auction proceeds to fund public safety priorities. Can you explain why authorizing the FCC's auction authority for 10 years without funding Next Generation 9-1-1 is a setback for public safety and first responders, if you will?

Dr. Fontes. Thank you. I was around when the Commission first received authorization from Congress to auction spectrum, and that has and continues to be a success. It was unfortunate that that authority lapsed.

Efforts continue to provide spectrum for our commercial and noncommercial uses. For the commercial space, an easy and efficient way to allocate and license spectrum is through auction authority. Now, we are in a situation where spectrum can be auctioned, but the ability to use auction revenues to fund Next Generation 9-1-1 doesn't exist. So there are opportunities here.

I would, first off, take a look at the FCC and say, look, I know you have proceedings in the 4.9 gig band or other proceedings here that may not fall within the purview of the restrictions or the

reallocations of 9-1-1 funding under the reconciliation bill. Are there opportunities there to take a look at additional spectrum that could possibly be auctioned off to support funding for Next Generation 9-1-1?

Mr. Pallone. Okay. And then the second question is that someone suggested that Congress needs to seek a new cost estimate for Next Generation 9-1-1 before passing a bill. But I think this is not only unnecessary, but also further delays long overdue action to invest in our public safety networks.

So, Dr. Fontes, do you think we need another cost estimate for Next Generation 9-1-1.

Dr. Fontes. No, but I think raising the question is an appropriate thing to ask. You know, do we need additional research or studies to assess costs? I don't think we do. And the reasons are, first off, the FCC collects, as part of their annual 9-1-1 report, how much States are investing in Next Generation 9-1-1. So that would give a clear indication of how States are progressing in their efforts to deploy Next Generation 9-1-1.

I also think that if the allocation of funds were available and managed correctly in working with State 9-1-1 authorities, local governments, and so forth, we would be able to see how that money is rolled out and deploying Next Generation 9-1-1 so as to not just dump a pot of money and say, okay, it is yours, have fun with it. It is looking at a pot of money and managing it wisely. And who knows, with State investment as well as Federal investment, we may achieve Next Generation 9-1-1 sooner rather than later.

Mr. Pallone. Well, thank you.

I am going to ask Mr. Newton and Mr. Wright, if you have time. I think you know that Mr. Bilirakis and I have a bill, the AM Radio for Every Vehicle Act. And I know, Mr. Newton, you emphasized the need to ensure access to AM radio in vehicles.

Can I ask you, Mr. Newton, and if time, Mr. Wright, can you explain why access to AM radio in vehicles is vital for protecting the public during disastrous situations and what are the potential

consequences if new vehicles do not include access to AM radio?

We will start with Mr. Newton and see if we have time for Mr. Wright.

Mr. Newton. Thank you, sir. The AM, it remains important to us, remains relevant to us as far as alerts and warnings. It covers greater than 90 percent of the population where Americans live now. It is something that is -- you know, we enjoy that as being an existing pathway to make these notifications. As we have migrated -- if vehicles are allowed to migrate away from having a -- guaranteed that it has an AM radio in it, then we are faced with -- we have lost a tool in the toolbox. And I think, again, it still remains relevant today, just as relevant as an IP-based tool.

Mr. Pallone. All right. There is only 7 minutes. Mr. Wright, do you want to say anything quick?

Mr. Wright. Sure. Make no mistake about it, AM radio is a critical tool in the tool chest. Fifty-two public radio stations operate in the AM band, and AM is the perfect, perfect vehicle for a project like BEACON for an always-on alerting channel.

Mr. Pallone. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentleman from Georgia, the vice chair of the subcommittee, Mr. Allen, for 5 minutes for your questions.

Mr. Allen. Thank you, Chairman Hudson, for holding this important hearing today. And to our expert witnesses, thank you for joining us.

Last year, my district suffered catastrophic damage and loss from Hurricane Helene. This was a once-in-a-hundred-year hurricane. Never before have we seen such damage in both the central Savannah River area and all of eastern Georgia. You can imagine, hundred-year-old trees and losing 40 percent of our treescape.

And, in fact, the first press conference that we had with the governor there, the State director was asked the question, how do we know where the shelters and the water and the food supplies

will be the locations? And he said, go to our website. We had no power, no internet, and, of course, all the television stations were there covering the press conference, and no television for 10 days. So you can see that we have got some work to do.

In the weeks after this hurricane, we had disruptions, as I mentioned, and danger to both personal safety and properties. Simply reinforce -- I want to simply reinforce how vital it is that we guarantee our public safety officials can always be assured that their communications will not be disrupted, especially during times of emergency.

Sheriff Dicus and Mr. Newton, how has the market for public services changed in the last 10 years?

Sheriff Dicus. So the market -- going back to your point -- and you might have a great point, okay, the website is not available. How do we know? One of the things we are doing in our county -- and obviously, everybody has one of these cell phones for the most part now -- is creating apps. We have Ready SB County as the app. So a lot of the predictive technologies that will happen in a fire, flood, mudslide -- we had Snowmageddon similar to kind of what you are describing that we -- in Southern California of all places.

But the market going -- it is kind of -- we have talked about various medias here today. The market is really all the medias. And we are looking at things generationally also. Certain people ingest things differently than others. And if we don't take that into part of this conversation, then we are missing the point. Same thing with first responders. If we don't develop a robust broadband network, they are going to figure out how to do it on their own with this device here. So the market has changed significantly.

And then also you talk about let's go into the sky. In my county, I have the San Andreas Fault. I have two main dispatch centers for that purpose and that purpose alone in terms of engineering reports that have been done. If that fault goes, they are going to certainly separate. We are also looking at Starlink and looking at the sky so that we cannot just have our safety

broadband network but augment it to where we can hit a satellite and still communicate voice over IP with the systems that we are talking about here today.

Mr. Allen. Okay. Mr. Newton?

Mr. Newton. Thank you. A lot of the areas that I respond to, it just -- these conditions, they change. What is working today may not necessarily be working tomorrow. We have -- I believe in Yancey County we have at least 13 A-frame sandwich boards in central parts of different communities. That is how we shared information for the first several weeks.

During Helene, we also were able to take advantage of low Earth orbit satellite systems. I think there is still an opportunity for the very small after -- satellite systems to keep some of these other devices online. We would much rather have an actual cell site instead of a deployable. But our ability to work through that -- and, in fact, many communities now, once the deployables were introduced by the carriers, we have now invested in our own. And we just coordinate with the carriers to make sure that we are not the cause of harmful interference.

Mr. Allen. Mr. Newton, obviously, do you feel better about the options that we have today versus 10 years ago, and why did you choose FirstNet over another service?

Mr. Newton. So we choose -- we actually have a diverse series of systems that we use. So we use the big three, you know, FirstNet, Verizon, and T-Mobile. Because, again, in my office, we can't fail. Everything always has to work.

What FirstNet has given us is that -- that dedicated core specifically for public safety. The use of Band 14, which they were allocated, that allows, again, that dedicated to public safety activities. I know during Tropical Storm Chantal, I took advantage of it when I had to set off our WEA system. I was able to -- in the midst of the storm, I was able to connect using my FirstNet device to the software that actually sets off our WEA system.

Mr. Allen. Okay. Thank you very much.

Thank you to our witnesses. I have few more questions I will submit for the record, and I

appreciate your response on that.

And I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

I will now recognize the gentleman from Florida, Mr. Soto, for 5 minutes of your questions.

Mr. Soto. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And let me start with a thank you. I know we have a lot of law enforcement, firefighters, first responders in the room, including the sheriff. We appreciate all that you do to help protect us. And that is what this discussion is about today, saving lives and responding to emergencies, including natural disasters.

I represent central Florida. We have urban, suburban, and rural areas, so we have to respond to all different types of scenarios.

For years, this committee has had a lot of great bipartisan work on using spectrum auction funds. The FirstNet, which we heard from today about Rip-and-Replace to help remove Chinese telecommunications equipment that is spying on Americans, and, of course, broadband on deployment.

But we have seen a departure from that lately with the deeply unpopular big ugly law, using that spectrum funding for the first time for billionaire tax cuts over public safety and disaster response. I know for Florida that is not a good deal for us. Add in mass firings at FEMA, cuts to next-generation warning systems through public broadcasting through the rescission package, as well as a rural broadband program that has been stalled for 8 months ever since the President got elected. This partisanship has come at a really terrible time.

We see hurricanes getting more extreme due to climate change in Florida. We have 3 months to go. I know Mr. Wright knows what I am talking about there. And our farmers, they are being hammered right now. Trump's tariffs, rising input costs, and a shrinking farm workforce due to mass deportation. The least we can do is get them internet as quick as we can.

And then as far as public safety, we can reduce crime and enhance public safety by continuing to fund the COPS Program to support local law enforcement. When we see a cut requested by the President for the COPS Program, I think we need to stand strong in Congress to support our local law enforcement. And we could reauthorize FirstNet with potential improvements and reforms that we are here to talk about today, as well as Next Generation 9-1-1, including satellite, which I know Mr. Newton talked about, among other technologies.

Sheriff Dicus, thank you for being here. I know Mr. Aguilar would be pleased to know that you are here today, and I know Mr. Ruiz as well,

My first question, you had mentioned that Next Generation 9-1-1 gives you better situational awareness. So I wanted to give you an opportunity to elaborate. How does it give you better situational awareness?

Sheriff Dicus. I am so glad you asked that question. So when we talk about it -- and I will just give you an example. We have an app called QuickCapture. We are fortunate to have Esri, the -- GIS works for DOD and does a number of things using GIS technology. But I will give you an example of a fire.

When we go in we give a warning. You generally have a law enforcement officer go through the same neighborhoods and say, hey, this be coming, get ready to go, that type of thing. We will have people that say whether they are going to go or refuse to go. We can immediately, with this application using GIS technology, which runs on a broadband network, to be able to say Shannon Dicus is not leaving. So now when it goes from a warning to mandatory, we know we can go directly back to him; look, it is imminent, the fire is going to hit, you have to leave now.

So that situational awareness of the public, also situational awareness of your deputies and law enforcement officer and fire personnel in the field. Then also, we remember, after-action reports are critically important so we do a better job next time. We can map every place a law enforcement officer or a firefighter was at to see if we hit the proper coverage areas, what

communication systems are working and got us to those points.

So it is amazing the technology that is available to law enforcement and first responders now to really do that analysis and give folks like you feedback, to give you really what I call street view.

Mr. Soto. Thank you, Sheriff.

Mr. Wright, welcome to Washington. You talked about the BEACON radio station and FPREN. How critical is public broadcasting to our rural areas around Alachua County, south Osceola, and Orange County?

We all know, when all else fails, the car radio is the last resort. I know that from personal experience. It would be great if you could discuss that a little bit.

Mr. Wright. Sure. Well, thank you for your question.

You know, truly, the infrastructure that the American taxpayers and Congress has invested in for decades in the public broadcasting transmission system, that truly is our last mile. The discussions about enhanced 9-1-1 are great. And this hits personally very close to home. My son-in-law is a Missouri state trooper in St. Louis. I sat on the Florida Highway Patrol Advisory Council. I understand how critically important that is that the public is able to communicate, our first responders are able to communicate. But once we get that information to our agencies, then they are alerting, and their advisory information has to get to the public in a very resilient environment. And that is what that public broadcasting infrastructure investment has been about for 50 to 60 years.

We need to maintain that investment to ensure that the citizens of Florida and South Carolina and Missouri and every other State in the country has easy, unfettered access to these critical alerts and advisories.

Mr. Soto. Thanks. My time has expired.

Mr. Hudson. I thank the gentleman.

I now recognize the gentleman from Ohio, Mr. Latta, for 5 minutes of his questions.

Mr. Latta. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. And thanks for our witness for being with us today, and for holding this really important hearing.

I recently met with the Crawford County Sheriff's Department in my district where they demonstrated how they utilized FirstNet to ensure they have reliable communication and respond to emergencies. And as one of the Republicans and one of the early members who was here that, when we created the FirstNet program, I must say, seeing first it deployed through my district and the Nation shows how this true public-private partnership has been tremendously successful.

Sheriff Dicus, if I could start with you. Congress created FirstNet to ensure that public safety has a seat at the table when the coverage decisions are made. And let me say, early on when we have had those initial hearings, there was a kind of a disconnect from Washington and thought it was going to impose its decisions and how I thought it was going to run and kind of forgot to talk to the folks at the local and State levels. And, fortunately, we saw a real change that came about from that.

But could you speak to the uniqueness this network offers for the public safety community when we talk about FirstNet?

Sheriff Dicus. Absolutely. First of all, you mentioned it, and I think this is where major county sheriffs becomes the best resource for all of you, and it is what I mentioned earlier in terms of street view, how are our troops out there on the streets actually interacting and what works the best and to have our opinions about these things. But when you talk about governance and the way that FirstNet is rolled out, for the first time, law enforcement and those professionals that are using that are part of those groups in terms of the implementation across the country and certainly in our State and locally.

So it gives us a voice we haven't had before. But, more importantly, for all of you, allows you to hear how this affects us, what is going on in the streets, and how we use that technology to better service to the public.

Mr. Latta. In your testimony, under your FirstNet infrastructure security, you got some areas in here that are kind of scary because we are talking about, you know, you responded to vandalism, sabotage, targeted acts of terrorism against towers and network modes. And, you know, you are talking about wanting to make sure you have the resilience of the system which requires both digital and physical security measures.

Could you talk about this? I know what you are talking about on the security side. What about on the digital side on how you protect it?

Sheriff Dicus. So it was mentioned -- and we just kind of surface touched it -- on the digital side related to cybersecurity, having almost DOD type of audit processes for our system. We are talking about critical information, not just to service the public, but also to different assets across the United States, critical infrastructure that we all work to protect.

It is almost the 10-year anniversary of what we call December 2. But the second largest terrorist attack occurred in San Bernardino County. And in that area, at first when those things happen, you don't know. Is that the primary target? What is the purpose? So you start setting out to look at your critical infrastructure, the physical protection, and from a cybersecurity perspective, being able to protect those. But it is really the audits and identifying the vulnerabilities leading up to that, both on the physical side and the technical side. And there is a lot of expertise here at the Federal Government level. If that could be shared with the locals, it would certainly enhance those security measures.

Mr. Latta. Excellent. Mr. Newton, as you know, there is a sunset for the FirstNet program, and Congress will need to reauthorize it by the end of 2026. Is there any length of time you believe would be appropriate for reauthorization?

Mr. Newton. And I am sorry, could you repeat that?

Mr. Latta. Yeah. With the sunset for FirstNet program and Congress will need to reauthorize it by the end of 2026, do you believe there is any length of time that would be

appropriate for the reauthorization for FirstNet?

Mr. Newton. Yeah. Overall it is a 20, 25-year project. I don't really have a clear opinion on it. I think what is important to me is the oversight, is the making sure we are meeting the goals that we set. I think it is establishing recovery -- again, one of the themes I bring up frequently is recovery time objectives. You know, making sure that those are being met, and especially with each new disaster, because they are not going to be fewer. But the next one that we see, let's revisit it. And how are we doing? What progress are we making? So, you know, I am not sure I can put a timeframe on that.

Mr. Latta. Okay. Let me just follow up in my last 33 seconds I have got here. You know, in your experience responding to disasters, has the IPAWS system been effective for transmitting emergency alerts to impact the communities?

Mr. Newton. And I am sorry, that --

Mr. Latta. In your experience responding to disasters, has the IPAWS system been effective for transmitting emergency alerts to impact the communities?

Mr. Newton. Yes. I think the technology is effective. I think that the things that we need to work on is our training, our ability to set the systems off, our reliance on it, and the public's response to a warning. Do they behave -- do they actually do the response that we have asked them to, the protective action?

Mr. Latta. Thank you very much. My time has expired, and I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentleman from California, Dr. Ruiz, for 5 minutes for your questions.

Mr. Ruiz. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As a physician and Member of Congress representing medically underserved rural southern California, I cannot overstate the importance of reliable broadband infrastructure for public health and safety.

In rural communities across the Coachella Valley and Imperial Valleys and in rural San Bernardino County, in my districts, access to emergency care and telehealth can mean the difference between life and death. Many residents, including working families, face barriers, care due to poor internet connectivity. These challenges are worsened by long-travel distances, provider shortages, and the recently passed Republican Big Ugly Bill are going to make those worse. Nearly $1 trillion to Medicaid cuts. Hospitals will close, meaning people are going to be more uninsured, needing more specialty care, increased chronic illness. They are going to have to travel longer distances. So it is like we took 10 giants steps back, and we are trying to make one tiny step forward with this hearing.

And broadband is no longer a luxury. It is essential infrastructure for the common good. Rural residents are at risk for not having good broadband, and not having connection is a risk for chronic illness.

In 2019, the FCC found that 17 percent of rural Americans liked broadband versus only 1 percent of urban residents. The CDC also links poor internet access to higher rates of chronic conditions and worse health outcomes. Having broadband is a social determinant of health.

Broadband is vital for veterans, patient managing chronic diseases, remote monitoring, and seniors relying on remote specialists. It is also important for first responders to respond to emergencies.

Sheriff Dicus, from your perspective, how do unreliable broadband and outdated safety networks hinder law enforcement coordination during disasters?

Sheriff Dicus. I am sorry. Dr. Ruiz, a number of things that you said we use regularly. I think you have experienced where you actually have an emergency situation in the field, you are talking to the doctor at the emergency room before you even move the patient.

So those things are critically important, broadband across the rural areas, as you are requesting, but it is even something simpler as saving lives. So, unfortunately, we deal with a lot of

school shootings and things with major county sheriffs and law enforcement really across the Nation. If you think about your ability to have that situational awareness, you are going after the threat. You are trying to stop the threat, but there are children that have been shot.

Being able to direct your medical emergency personnel into them saves lives. You can't just secure the area. You have got to move. It is a moving, actionable, ongoing event.

Mr. Ruiz. Let me ask you another question. Does Needles and Lake Havasu, the area in San Bernardino that I represent, use NG9-1-1?

Sheriff Dicus. They are. They are transitioning, and that is a very unique area because of the borders involved, as you well know. And even on the lake we have multiple jurisdictions as a result of that. So, yes, we are using that technology.

Mr. Ruiz. Thank you. You know, because we need to modernize and expand our emergency communication systems, which is why I strongly support the NG, Next Generation, 9-1-1. Our 9-1-1 call centers must be able to receive real-time text, photos, and videos to enhance emergency response and protect both callers and first responders. But this only works if the digital backbone is strong.

In my district, we have already seen the consequences of aging infrastructure. Copper wire theft has disrupted 9-1-1 service, delaying emergency response and endangering lives.

According to the GAO, insufficient broadband infrastructure in rural areas contributes to slower response times as first responders cannot always access critical information in real time. Slower response time in the emergency department means, if you are having a stroke, you are more likely to die or have permanent damage. Same thing with cardiac arrest or heart attacks.

Dr. Fontes, given your leadership at National Emergency Number Association, what should Congress do to retire old systems and equip public safety answering points, or PSAPs, for NG9-1-1?

Dr. Fontes. Thank you for your question.

If I am looking at public safety writ large from the field responders to the public who calls

9-1-1, the weakest link in this whole chain is Next Generation 9-1-1. You talk about broadband capabilities that the public would have available to them and the ability to transmit information to 9-1-1. Well, if that 9-1-1 center is not Next Generation 9-1-1 capable or is voice-centric -- in other words, rich information is removed -- you lose valuable information --

Mr. Ruiz. Yes, sir.

Dr. Fontes. -- valuable time.

What Congress can do, and I have said this on multiple occasions --

Mr. Ruiz. You have 5 seconds.

Dr. Fontes. -- is to ensure funding for Next Generation 9-1-1.

Mr. Ruiz. Thank you. And with that, I yield back my time.

Mr. Hudson. Well done. Thank you.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Virginia, Mr. Griffith, for 5 minutes to ask your questions.

Mr. Griffith. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it.

Mr. Newton, I know that your part of North Carolina is a little bit east of the part that I border, but my district is very mountainous, and I border a big chunk of North Carolina, from Henry County, which would be Martinsville area, all the way to where the Virginia-North Carolina line ends.

We weren't hit as hard, but we were hit by Helene. And, interestingly, in the areas most hard hit, all of my cell service went down. So I am out driving around the day afterwards and actually had an employee who I lost for several hours. The good news is we didn't have any water fatalities. We had two that were related to wind, but we didn't have any actual water fatalities in my district, but we had significant damage. And all the cell phone towers, for whatever reason, and it was -- it turns out it was different reasons in different areas. Because I tried to find the common thread and couldn't.

So what can we do to harden our communication infrastructures so that we don't have that

problem again? Because in Grayson County, they had one hot spot in downtown Independence, right on -- and that is on the North Carolina border. In Damascus, we had to bring in low Earth orbit Starlink. There was a mobile unit available in Wise County that the health wagon brought over. And then later, FirstNet showed up, apparently, or in some kind of conjunction there, eventually.

But what can we do to harden our existing structure? And should we be looking at leapfrogging to go to low Earth orbit as a part -- I know that FirstNet's looking at that. But what should we be doing? Because every locality has problems, particularly in western North Carolina and southwestern Virginia. They all have problems coming up with the funding. And low Earth orbit looks like it is a more affordable way to go than some of the others. What say you.

Mr. Newton. So I think -- there is a couple of different approaches that are relevant here. I think there is the trying to prevent a site from going down, and then there is also trying to compress the time that that site is down if we do meet that threshold. So I think the -- preventing the site from going down, you know, hardening measures at the sites, things to prevent vandalism. There is the things that cause our problems. They lose a link on a fiber link, so they don't have data or they lose power. And usually those are not independent of each other. Usually we have some combination of that.

So on the side of losing the connectivity, what we found -- and this is, you know, as low Earth orbit satellite constellations are improved, this will likely change. But there is also a capacity issue with those. So we may balance it with a VSAT, which is slightly slower but a more dedicated carved out line.

Mr. Griffith. All right. For everybody back home, VSAT.

Mr. Newton. I am sorry. Very small aperture terminal.

Mr. Griffith. Okay.

Mr. Newton. That is a satellite service. It is in a geosynchronous orbit, slightly lower bandwidth, but it is still -- it is a carved-out dedicated pathway.

What we saw is, early on, our low Earth orbit satellite terminals, the Starlink, they provide us connectivity very quickly, very easy, easy to deploy. At some point you reach a capacity. So there is that side of it.

There is also -- what we do in our State USC, many State USCs do, is that combination -- or that partnership with the carriers to bring them in to, how do we get your services back up? Where are the services down? What can we do to help those carriers get them back up?

And then the last thing I would lead you with would be the -- when we had -- western North Carolina, just like in West Virginia -- the western portion of Virginia -- are difficult areas to provide data services in. And so what tends to happen is we put all of our carriers on one fiber optic line. And so if that one line is hit by a tree, by a landslide, whatever it may be, then all the services on that fiber line go down.

Mr. Griffith. Yeah. And I don't know how you solve that because we got so many -- it is mountainous, there is lots of little valleys and so forth. That is hard. I will say, as far as being able to respond quickly, in Caswell County, at least the first responders were able to get their radio system back up and running because somebody knew exactly what to do. They went to the tower and started the generator, which for whatever reason hadn't started itself, but one of their -- one of their team knew that is where they needed to go and they got it taken care of fairly quickly in that county. But there were other places where it took days before we got everything back up and running. So I do appreciate that.

Looks like my time is out, and I appreciate all of you being here today. This is an important issue. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

I will now recognize the gentleman from California, Mr. Peters, for 5 minutes for your questions.

Mr. Peters. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing.

And there has been a lot of agreement here. I don't want to go over a lot of ground that has already been tread. I think all of us in this committee really want to help our first responders make the best decisions and keep all of our respective communities safe across the country.

I would say, you know, we have suffered a couple setbacks in this effort on funding. One is we had an agreement that we would use spectrum auction proceeds to fund this, and that money went into the big bill. And so now the work we have done on this committee has taken a little bit of a hit.

I would say also, I got to say on rescissions that this is a really difficult thing for this body. You make a deal with the other side, and you go -- you talk about things like public broadcasting and whether it should be publicly funded because it is broadcasting or whether it should be publicly funded because it helps you with emergency access. And we make a deal, we shake hands, the President signs it. And then you go back and you swipe out what you don't like. And it makes it really hard to continue to work, even on stuff that we agree on when we do practices like that.

So I am hoping that my colleagues -- appreciating you may not agree with that particular policy -- will understand and maybe resist the temptation to do this anymore.

We have got to get back to working together. We have got to get back to understanding that this institution has an independent duty, the power of the purse. We all should stand up for it, even on the items -- particular items we might not agree with. But when it is important to the whole agreement and the whole -- ability of us to make progress and trust each other, trust is what it is all about in this room.

Sheriff Dicus, I want to ask you a particular question to build on some of this stuff that has happened. I took a ride-along with my local police department in San Diego. One thing I noticed was how primitive the technology was in the car to tell you where to go. And so what I saw -- first of all, it is all by radio. It seems like each officer decides where he or she will go based on a screen that looks like it could have been from the eighties.

Will Next Generation 9-1-1 help -- in the car help those officers get to the right place, maybe help response times, maybe prioritize calls in a way that we haven't been able to do with technology before?

Sheriff Dicus. The answer is, yes, sir, it will. You are looking at primitive technology, and a lot of it is causing us to replace computer automated dispatch systems and things of that nature. And you are running on legacy systems. So instead of using something modern like Apple CarPlay to be able to get from call to call, you are using an archaic system.

So you are absolutely right there. That is why you will see a lot of the officers, and I am sure you did on your ride-along actually, go to technology like this.

So having that reliable broadband network -- and what is going to drive that is the amount of data that a first responder can actually ingest now.

You have heard the concept real-time crime center? That is the data -- that is the data reception center to be able to work on a broadband network and then transfer that back out to the field so that you have real-time operational data.

Mr. Peters. How does the Federal Government participate in making sure that that technology is available and maybe standardized and maybe ultimately adopted?

Sheriff Dicus. Yeah. I mentioned earlier policy and governance, giving some direct guidelines so that public safety can always be on the latest and greatest system, and also the funding sources. Unfortunately, any type of technological advancement you get you can almost count on, as a local agency, there is going to be a 5 percent uplift every year, and it just becomes cost prohibitive for both counties and local jurisdictions.

Mr. Peters. Well, you know, we are from relatively large organizations in terms of sheriff and police. I mean, I imagine that for smaller outfits it is even more difficult. I mean, can the Federal Government assist with that?

Sheriff Dicus. So it is kind of interesting in terms of the implementation. I call it in a county

as big as your county and as big as mine, I call it the have and have-nots. Smaller jurisdictions, if the funding is available, can actually turn much quicker than the larger ones, because I have to make what works, as was mentioned out in Needles earlier, all the way to my very populated and urban areas.

So the small areas and small police departments, if they have the money, can usually turn on a dime and get this fairly quickly. So, again, making that funding available.

Mr. Peters. Well, here in Congress I think we all appreciate the risk of bureaucracy in larger organizations. So thanks for bringing that up.

I would say FirstNet is up for reauthorization in 2027. I am glad we are starting meaningful conversations. I made my caveat about working together. I hope people take it seriously. And I hope we can make some improvements to improve the program for the benefit of our first responders who we all care about.

And with that I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. I thank the gentleman.

I recognize the gentleman from Florida, Mr. Bilirakis, for 5 minutes to ask your questions.

Mr. Bilirakis. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it very much. Thanks for holding this hearing.

During my district work period, I was able to tour the Citrus County emergency response center under the direction of Sheriff David Vincent and see firsthand how FirstNet is facilitating lifesaving operations for my constituents but all over the State of Florida.

The sheriff highlighted how FirstNet has advanced -- it has really enhanced officer safety and response time. Specifically, the increased connectivity has allowed his deputies to be able to upload body cam footage from within their vehicles as opposed to having to drive to a separate location to upload.

So, Mr. Newton, I have a question. From your experience, what can you say about response

times and information sharing among emergency personnel pre- versus post-FirstNet implementation?

Mr. Newton. Thank you for the question. What we have seen primarily has been -- historically, if we had a call for you, we would call you on a land mobile radio and tell you over voice this is where your call is, this is the address, these are the conditions that are occurring. And that is if everything worked fine and the weather is great and the radio transmission went through.

Now, that police officer, that sheriff's deputy, that paramedic, have a terminal in their car that oftentimes we don't even have to say the words. The call gets sent to them digitally. The information is there. The chance for us to give you an address incorrectly is taken off of the table. And then the rich content, if we had video, if we had files associated, if we have a history associated with an address, all of those things are then part of this ecosystem that this responder is now working in. And that is the most significant change that we have seen, that the rich data that they immediately have access to.

Mr. Bilirakis. Thank you very much.

Next question. Every so often we hear about the 9-1-1 outages impacting communities. Just in July, a 9-1-1 outage affected six Florida counties, including Citrus and Pasco County, which I represent. Ultimately, in this instance, the outage was due to an inadvertently cut cable. However, it raises question about emergency operation redundancy and security.

So, Mr. Newton, again, what procedure do you have in place in the event of a 9-1-1 outage, and what are your recommendations for ensuring continuity of 9-1-1 services that would help prevent the frequency of these outages around the country?

Mr. Newton. The biggest threat to any 9-1-1 system is a back hoe. What we implement in 9-1-1 centers across North Carolina ideally is a disparate pathway. So it physically comes in at a different angle from a different street, if possible, for fiber lines or any of our backup lines. And in

some cases, that is not. We discussed in western North Carolina sometimes you only have one path, or that last mile may be shared by, you know, two different carriers coming in, but then they share that last mile to your building, your physical structure, and that is at risk.

One of the projects that North Carolina is working on now is an AT&T FirstNet additional back haul, where an additional AVPN, or AT&T virtual private network, that is solely over FirstNet, it takes advantage of the security of the core of FirstNet, and it becomes a wireless -- at least as immune to the back hoe -- that will guarantee that we still have at least one more pathway into that 9-1-1 center to provide telephony, to provide data.

Mr. Bilirakis. Thank you for that.

Dr. Fontes, looking forward to the future we must. We have a number of hearings -- we have had a number of hearings in this committee on AI. How do you envision AI being utilized to enhance emergency response in the future, and how can Congress help to make that the reality? Dr. Fontes, please.

Dr. Fontes. Thank you. Thank you for that question. I am a real strong believer in any new technology. AI is that.

I think in the 9-1-1 field right now, it is early, it is an early entrant. But looking into the future, to your question, I think AI can do a lot to enhance the information coming into the 9-1-1 center and ultimately distribute it to those who are the field responders. You can do simultaneous translations. You may be able to assess the situational awareness by factors that the human eye or the human ear cannot detect so easily. That would allow that 9-1-1 professional to perhaps follow up with more specific questions.

Being able to garner that information is critically important to make sure that our field responders are fully prepared for the situation that they are going to participate in.

Mr. Bilirakis. Makes sense. I appreciate it very much.

And I yield back, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

The chair now recognizes the gentlelady from Michigan, Mrs. Dingell, for 5 minutes of questioning.

Mrs. Dingell. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Every day we see firsthand the critical need to modernize our emergency communications infrastructure. Whether it is upgrading 9-1-1 systems, expanding coverage for first responders, or ensuring our weather alert systems are reliable, these investments directly impact public safety across the country.

Since I have been in Congress, I have fought for and secured funding to upgrade communications technology, because our first responders deserve strong and resilient tools to protect our communities.

As co-chair of the EMS Caucus, with Chair Hudson, I know how critical these issues are. Our first responders work around the clock under immense pressure, and the least we can do is to ensure they have reliable systems that help save lives. These upgrades are tangible. They include faster response times, uninterrupted 9-1-1 service during power outages, and lifesaving information delivered to our communities. And as the need grows, resources aren't keeping up.

I am going to join my other colleagues in expressing my concern that the spectrum auction proceeds from President Trump's One Big -- I use different adjectives -- Beautiful Bill are being diverted to pay for tax breaks rather than used for Next Generation 9-1-1 and other public safety. But having said that, let me start with local weather notification systems.

Last year, a tornado struck southeast Michigan without any advanced warning, resulting in the death of a 2-year-old boy. To put things in perspective, Michigan typically experiences about 13 to 15 tornadoes in an entire year. As of late August 2025, this year total of tornadoes is 30. More than double the average.

In the summer, during another period of extreme severe weather, NOAA's all hazardous

weather radios went completely offline, leaving parts of my district in the dark. These radios are essential to public safety, especially in our low-connectivity communities where internet and cellular-based alerts aren't reliable or available. And when they fail, lives are at risk, that all of you know.

Mr. Newton, the failure of the NOAA radios, coupled with the lack of a tornado warning last year, shows we need more than just a fix. We need redundancy and backup plans. What should we be doing to strengthen resiliency in our emergency alert systems to ensure they don't fail during life-threatening weather events?

Mr. Newton. Thank you for that question. I think, specifically for the National Weather Service warning, weather alert radios -- again, it is ongoing. None of these projects are a one-time. They require continued sustained funding, whether it is upgrades, updates, maintenance, the technical expertise to do those repairs, all of those are absolutely essential.

I think also, we live in an ecosystem of warning and notification in alert systems. There is no one approach that successfully warns a public. Part of that is also the redundancy that we built in. What we really like about NOAA weather alert radios is the fact they make a lot of noise, and they will wake you up at 2 o'clock in the morning, especially for the unexpected incident that is occurring, but, you know, encouraging additional redundancies and defense in-depth with more than one way to receive a notification.

Mrs. Dingell. Thank you.

Mr. Wright, we have heard reports of budget constraints and staffing shortages at NOAA, the National Weather Service, FEMA, may be impacting the ability to upgrade systems and maintain operations. How do budget cuts and staffing shortages impact coordination and reliability and the ability to respond quickly to emergencies?

Mr. Wright. Well, they make an extraordinary impact across the entire spectrum. The scientists, the experts at the National Weather Service, the National Hurricane Center, throughout

the NOAA culture, they are experts that provide us with this alerting information that then, flowing through the FEMA IPAWS system, goes to the public broadcasting infrastructure which exists across the entire country, and through the PBS WARN System, which is the redundant system for our wireless emergency alerts.

So these are really critical questions that we have to wrestle with today. But at the end of the day, part of a solution is innovation, utilizing the infrastructure that we have been investing in for years and years, and that is the public broadcasting infrastructure, that last mile.

Our BEACON project, which does incorporate artificial intelligence in the most responsible possible way, takes these alerts, coming directly from the National Weather Service, the National Hurricane Center, county emergency agencies, and then translates those directly into a 24-hour always-on alerting channel on the most resilient medium, which is broadcast radio.

We have seen this time and time again in Florida and South Carolina where during the worst of times, when these go down and you lose internet connectivity and you lose everything else that people think is their final, you know, word; no, no, no, it is broadcast radio, and it is the work that is happening through projects like FPREN and BEACON that are making the difference. We have to be afraid -- have to be -- not be afraid of innovation and fully utilizing the infrastructure that exists today and investing in that.

Mrs. Dingell. Thank you. I know I am out of time. I will yield back, Mr. Chair, but I have more questions for the record.

Mr. Hudson. Well, we will be happy to have you submit those, and witnesses, I am sure, will be happy to respond.

I know recognize the gentleman from Georgia, Mr. Carter, for your 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. Carter of Georgia. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you for holding this hearing. And thank all of you for being here.

Emergency communication is certainly important and certainly important in my district. I

have the honor and privilege of representing the entire coast of Georgia, over a hundred miles of pristine coastline. And, of course, we have a lot of hurricanes in our area, hurricanes as well as flooding. In fact, Hurricane Helene was one of the most devastating storms that we have ever had in south Georgia, and it certainly was a challenge to our emergency communication.

It tore through the home State, through my home State, of Georgia, and it wreaked havoc on cell towers and on fiber lines and many other resources that were needed to have efficient communication. And it went on up, as you know, Mr. Newton, into western North Carolina. And certainly the devastation up there was severe.

From your experience, Mr. Newton, managing hurricane responses, what communication tools do local emergency managers rely on most when cell towers and power infrastructure are damaged?

Mr. Newton. Thank you for that question. Usually, at that point -- so our primary systems, our telephony, what we normally rely on is down. There is no one solution, but what it tends to be is a combination. So in the last -- during Helene, it was a lot of deployables where -- whether it is a satellite COLT, or a cell tower on a light truck; a COW, a Cell on Wheels, any combination of a whole fleet across different carriers that -- to restore cell signals in a small area.

At the same time, our ability to pass information through a whole community approach, we are sharing -- you know, the AM radio stations, PBS radio stations -- we are sharing instant information, we are sharing where the shelters are, where water is. And that is -- I would love to take credit for that, but they took information that we were broadcasting, as well as other sources, crafted it together, and they are a trusted local source, and they put that information out as well.

Amateur radio, AuxComm, has always been with us, has always been a tool for sharing information. And so we use that. I had never been a huge proponent for low Earth orbit satellite internet systems. I now own at least six because of that event.

Mr. Carter of Georgia. That is interesting. That is interesting.

Well, let me ask you something. What about communicating across jurisdictional lines? In the State of Georgia, we have 159 counties, a lot of counties, more than we really need, and each of them have their own emergency management system, or at least most of them do. What are the kind of challenges that you face when you are going across jurisdictional lines like that?

Mr. Newton. So across any jurisdictional lines, you have disparate radio systems that may be on a conventional UHF or a VHF versus a trunked radio system. In North Carolina, we enjoy a combined 700, 800-megahertz trunked radio system that is statewide. Statewide has links to Virginia, has links to South Carolina, has links to Georgia, and our ability to patch things in.

Within that, we dictate certain -- as part of the statewide interoperability committee, we dictate certain interoperability channels and talk groups and frequencies that should be in any radio in that system. And so as long as I can see you and we have a radio program to the same system, we can find a way to communicate.

Mr. Carter of Georgia. Well, let me ask you this. What kind of improvements would you like to see after the experience that you had with Hurricane Helene and the experiences that you have had with other types of natural disasters? What kind of improvements do you think would help local governments the most?

Mr. Newton. Local governments, we had that period of time immediately after a disaster where we couldn't communicate using our traditional means. And there is that fog of not knowing exactly what is happening, not knowing what resource -- we use a pool method. We generally don't send resources ahead of time until we know what is needed, and that local emergency manager calls it in and says, I need this, I need that. So not having communications is really critical for us.

I think, again, hardening of the -- especially in the high-density area cell sites, having a recovery time objective. Granted, an 8-day recovery of most of our cellular systems, you know -- 20 or 80-some percent of it is nothing short of miraculous. It is not enough. We work in these environments. We are relying on these systems communicating. It is a national public safety

broadband network. We needed it back up, like all the other carriers.

Mr. Carter of Georgia. Great. Well, again, this is extremely important. I thank all of you. Thank all of the witnesses for being here.

And thank you, again, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing, and I yield back.

Mr. Bilirakis. [Presiding.] The gentleman yields back.

I will recognize Representative Kelly for her 5 minutes of questioning.

Ms. Kelly. Thank you, Mr. Chair and Ranking Member Matsui, for holding this morning's hearing. And thank you to all of our witnesses for participating.

The recent flooding in Illinois' Second Congressional District which I represent, which is Chicago, the suburbs, and central Illinois, has once again underscored how crucial it is for constituents to have reliable and timely access to public safety alerts during natural disasters. When cellular networks fail, as we have seen during major emergencies, alternative communication pathways become a lifeline for communities, ensuring that all emergency systems, including 9-1-1 telecommunicators, and public safety broadcast networks such as FirstNet, are fully modernized, resilient, and properly funded is essential to protecting lives and property.

Mr. Newton, as an emergency management director with decades of experience responding to major disasters, you have firsthand knowledge of how critical reliable communication systems are for an effective emergency response. During events like Hurricane Katrina, widespread outages of cellular networks hampered response efforts and endangered lives. Based on your experience, what improvements are the most urgent to ensure that FirstNet remains resilient and operational during prolonged power outages and physical damage?

Mr. Newton. Thank you for that question. I echo what I mentioned before. I believe, you know, hardening of certain facilities, you know, trying to prevent a single point of failure anywhere in the network. I think, you know, sustained funding to not only maintain the network but expand the network. I think the other challenge that we continue to face is coverage in rural

areas and making sure that we continue to expand in those areas as well.

Ms. Kelly. Thank you. As you have heard, we all heard, that Chicago might get a visit from the National Guard. In light of these threats to militarize cities like Chicago, how much will such actions impact first responder communication systems and their ability to coordinate effectively during real crises? And what improvements are necessary to ensure our public safety communication networks can withstand and adapt to disruptions in such scenarios?

Mr. Newton. In my opinion, I think that it poses less a technical challenge for us. The capacity is there, the radios are there, the inoperability frequencies are there. I think it is a leadership challenge in making sure that we have these different groups and different organizations that are operating within the same communities and making sure that they are communicating.

I think the most dangerous thing that we would have would be two different organizations that are not communicating and create some encounter there. I think that that would be my biggest concern is that, you know, regardless of the operations that are occurring, always talking.

Ms. Kelly. The Next Generation 9-1-1 Act is crucial for modernizing emergency communications to handle today's data-driven demands, yet many communities face barriers to its full deployment. Dr. -- is it Fontes.

Dr. Fontes. Thank you. That is true.

Ms. Kelly. How would securing full funding for the Next Generation 9-1-1 system improve the ability of emergency services to receive and utilize critical data, including text, photos, videos, during emergency calls.

Dr. Fontes. Thank you for the question. And it is a simple question that is very complicated. The simple question is, the simple answer is funding. And funding is essential. There is no question about it. Communities, Tribal lands, rural areas may have challenges maintaining both the legacy system while they are transitioning to a Next Generation 9-1-1 system at cost.

So there is an opportunity here to move 9-1-1 into the 21st century. As I said earlier, 9-1-1 is the weakest link between the public in their broadband capabilities and public safety responders with their broadband capabilities. 9-1-1 -- if in the Next Generation 9-1-1 environment were to actually happen, the information-rich associations with those calls coming in will benefit the public, will benefit the ability of the field responders to respond appropriately for the emergency register. Funding is the key issue.

Ms. Kelly. Thank so much. And it is an issue. You know, I have the city of Chicago, I have 4,500 farms in my district too, in central Illinois, very rural areas. So it is so very important.

Thank you, and I yield back.

RPTR KRAMER

EDTR SECKMAN

[12:15 p.m.]

Mr. Bilirakis. The gentlelady yields back.

I now recognize my good friend from the great State of Texas, Mr. Pfluger, for his 5 minutes of questioning.

Mr. Pfluger. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I applaud the committee for having this hearing. It is obviously very important, and I think a bipartisan issue that -- we have talked so much today -- obviously, over the summer, we went through a very tragic time and in a place, in a location, geographically speaking, that is very hard at times to get connected and to send alerts. And so my mind has been there all summer on, you know, what it means to alert people. And I think this is exactly the type of work this committee should be proud of doing in a bipartisan way.

I will start with FirstNet. I have recently been connected to FirstNet after the events happened, the flooding happened this summer, and wanted -- I think it is a good example of a public-private partnership and wanted to dig in a little bit. Some of these questions we have kind of danced around. So they are going to be similar. But, Sheriff, I will start with you.

I know that there have been concerns expressed about how to improve the oversight and the transparency of FirstNet and the network. But I want to hear your experiences with FirstNet and either challenges with signal strength or the system in general, or the positive issues that you have seen from FirstNet.

Sheriff Dicus. Thank you for that question.

Most of what we have seen is positive. The reality in a county as large as mine is really the buildout. And it is also a communications -- in your case in Texas, the communications before the event happened, staging things that the locals may need, and a lot of what I see is we are driving down -- in law enforcement, we call this the mutual aid process. A lot of times -- and I will say it

maybe sometime be, like, a political perspective, but it is being driven down. That process works up. We call and ask for those. We stage assets both federally, State, and locally, to be able to respond in the event the weather changes.

So, when we are talking about a broadband network, we are talking about including AI, predictive technologies that can run you through scenarios for the staging of that equipment and prepare the first responders to be much quicker in an event like you experienced is something we need. And FirstNet carries that through. We just need more of it so we can guarantee that connectivity.

Mr. Pfluger. Thank you for that.

And, Mr. Newton, I will go to you and just refer back to Hurricane Helene and the experiences that you saw there from the wireless emergency alerts -- or excuse me -- from FirstNet -- not -- I am getting ahead of myself, but from FirstNet on Hurricane Helene.

Mr. Newton. We saw, first and foremost, that the partnerships at the State level of coordinating where we are responding -- or deploying equipment to, where is the need, and then, throughout the event, as the event evolved, our ability to move equipment around and make things work. Again, it was a catastrophic disaster for us. Tremendous damage. Never seen this much, from a technical side, the type of damage that we saw to fiberoptic lines and to power systems -- our ability to power cell sites.

But the close partnerships there and the fact that we have several agencies that have their own deployables -- and so I am able just to set up my own FirstNet temporary compact rapid deployable. And I think -- the challenge I think we will see in the near future is, as that becomes more prolific, we still have to coordinate that with the carrier. We want to make sure that we are not creating the interference.

Mr. Pfluger. Well, that brings up a good -- just kind of a good point. I mean, sometimes we can't stage. Sometimes we can't predict, you know. In the case of the floods that happened in my

district and in Kerrville, I mean, that highlights maybe the need for secondary options and the challenges of getting into those rural places which, whether it is Hurricane Helene or it is in the hill country of Texas or other places, sometimes you can't actually physically get there. So, you know, I want to hear your thoughts on low Earth orbit direct to device options that could be helpful in those cases.

Mr. Newton. So one of my staff members deployed to Helene the day after impact. And his task was to bring back connectivity to PSAPs. And I believe -- I don't know if it was his first or his thirteenth PSAP that he arrived at, the person greeted him at the door and said, "I don't know what an angel looks like, but I believe it is you." And his role was to bring connectivity to a communication center who had been in the dark from the time of impact.

And so, in fact, what he deployed was a low Earth orbit satellite system, a Starlink system that provided WiFi and that gave you WiFi calling, and that center was then reconnected both with the public and your families who didn't know -- those telecommunicators -- how they fared.

Mr. Pfluger. Well, thank you for that.

Again, I applaud the committee for the work on reauthorizing and getting FirstNet, you know, moving in a positive direction but also some other options. And I think my time has expired. So I yield back.

Mr. Bilirakis. The gentleman yields back.

I now recognize Representative Menendez for his 5 minutes of questioning.

Mr. Menendez. Thank you, Chairman.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today, especially those who are representing the public safety community. We appreciate your dedication to keeping all Americans safe.

Mr. Chairman, we have heard a lot of talk about strengthening public safety infrastructure from our colleagues on the other side of the aisle today. But the Trump administration and congressional Republicans have consistently weakened our emergency management systems,

endangering the lives of Americans and first responders, and making us less prepared when disasters strike.

It is not lost on me that we are holding this hearing on the same week as the September 11th terrorist attacks, an anniversary that is particularly salient in my district, which was home to many of the first responders who answered the call of duty that day -- and to me personally. I was there across the river in Hoboken and later served as a commissioner of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. And so it is my belief that we need to do everything possible to keep our first responders safe, to give them the best equipment and technology that we possibly can, something that I will do so long as I get to serve in this role.

September 11th also revealed fundamental issues with our Nation's public safety communications. And, while we have improved our emergency preparedness, Republicans and President Trump are heading us in the wrong direction. Republicans have cut funding for public broadcasting, hindered the Next Generation Warning System, and left Next Generation 911 without a dedicated source of funding. At the same time, the Trump administration has gutted emergency preparedness funding, including FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Program, that supported hazard mitigation projects in Hoboken, Bayonne, Newark, all municipalities I have the privilege of representing.

It is extremely frustrating and disappointing that we find ourselves here with all the work and progress that we have made.

I would like to start my questioning with the importance of Next Generation 911. New Jersey has experienced 75 natural disasters, costing over $1 billion over the last 40 years. As a New Jerseyan who lived through Superstorm Sandy, I know how critical it is that we have effective emergency communications infrastructure.

Sheriff, just a yes or no. Is upgrading our Nation's emergency communications systems a lifesaving necessity?

Sheriff Dicus. Yes, sir.

Mr. Menendez. And Sheriff, how critical is upgrading our Next Generation 911 systems for the cybersecurity and resiliency of our Nation's emergency communications networks?

Sheriff Dicus. Critical.

Mr. Menendez. Thank you.

Dr. Fontes, you responded earlier to a question for Ranking Member Pallone that there isn't currently a clear pathway to fund Next Generation 911 through spectrum auction proceeds. So just a yes or no. Sitting here today, would you feel more confident about the future of Next Generation 911 if Republicans had not walked away from a bipartisan agreement to fund it through spectrum auctions?

Dr. Fontes. Yes, sir.

Mr. Menendez. Thank you.

I am incredibly concerned that Republicans have abandoned this bipartisan agreement that would have used funding from the FCC spectrum auction authority to fund Next Generation 911, making our public safety networks less secure and less resilient from cyber attacks. And all this is happening in the context of the Trump administration's cuts to critical cybersecurity initiatives for telecommunications networks at CISA and other agencies.

Mr. Newton, Sheriff, does the Federal Government have an essential role to play with respect to ensuring that we have the cybersecurity capabilities to protect our emergency communication systems? Yes or no?

Sheriff Dicus. Yes.

Mr. Newton. Yes, sir.

Mr. Menendez. And should we not be doing more to collaborate with our local agencies who are on the frontlines to give you all the resources to ensure that as we improve our communication systems that they are cybersecurity resilient? Yes or no?

Mr. Newton. Yes, sir.

Sheriff Dicus. Yes, sir.

Mr. Menendez. Thank you.

Mr. Wright, congressional Republicans recently rescinded funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, ending its role administering the Next Generation Warning System program that helps local communities receive emergency alerts during natural disasters.

Mr. Wright, is funding for the Next Generation Warning System crucial for our Nation's public safety infrastructure?

Mr. Wright. Lifesaving.

Mr. Menendez. And how have cuts to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting from the Republican rescissions package affected funding for the Next Generation Warning System?

Mr. Wright. Profoundly. Congress, in its wisdom, since fiscal year 2022 has appropriated $176 million to the Next Generation Warning System.

Mr. Menendez. Thank you --

Mr. Wright. Right now, we have $100 million that is in limbo. That money can be put to good use.

Mr. Menendez. Understood.

Mr. Wright, just yes or no. Following the shutdown of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, should FEMA take over administering grants for the Next Generation Warning System?

Mr. Wright. Yes, I believe it should.

Mr. Menendez. Thank you. That is why I co-wrote a letter with my colleague, Congresswoman Barragan, demanding that the Acting administration -- Administrator of FEMA take action.

But, in closing, this shouldn't be a Republican issue. It shouldn't be a Democrat issue. This shouldn't even be a bipartisan issue. This should be nonpartisan. We are finding ourselves in

times where this administration and my colleagues across the aisle are being complicit in making us weaker and less secure. We should be doing the exact opposite.

Thank you all so much for being here, for all the work that you do.

Mr. Hudson. [Presiding.] I thank the gentleman.

I now recognize the gentlelady from Indiana, Ms. Houchin, for 5 minutes to ask your questions.

Mrs. Houchin. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Matsui. Thanks to you to the witnesses for being here today and for your testimony.

Last month, I met with first responders in Ripley County, Indiana. I saw firsthand the importance of reliable public safety communications with FirstNet. I also represent a district that has had its share of natural disasters, and I know the importance of needing to have clear communication systems throughout. It was great to see them share information on how quickly and effectively resources can be deployed and information can be exchanged with first responders to keep the public safe.

In rural districts like mine, there are areas of the district that are still -- what I would consider dead spots in terms of communication services with traditional cellular service. So FirstNet does provide that additional access for our first responders in our less than covered areas.

But communication, as many of you have mentioned, is more than convenient. It can be lifesaving. Today's hearing reminds us that success requires Federal, State, and local partners all rowing in the same direction. In a crisis, no single system can carry the load. True resilience comes from interoperability, making sure radio, cellular, satellite, and Next Generation 911 systems can connect seamlessly so first responders can communicate and share information in real time.

To the panel, could you speak about the importance of interoperability in public safety communications? What steps should we consider to make sure these systems do work seamlessly across jurisdictions and in our technologies? Start with Mr. Newton.

Mr. Newton. Thank you. I think, first and foremost, the continued funding for the statewide interoperability coordinators that are located in each State, those individuals really guide the process of -- you know, the technology may be there, but then where are the processes? What are the policies and plans?

Mrs. Houchin. Sheriff?

Sheriff Dicus. Communication and technology is what we are focused on, obviously, today. But it is also the interoperability and knowing who your partners are across those lines prior to settling some of these governance decisions as it relates to technology. But, more importantly, knowing each other before the incident happens and you are shaking hands for the first time in the street.

Mrs. Houchin. Thank you.

Dr. Fontes. Interoperability, it is essential it be a key component to Next Generation 911. Currently, if I am typing in or entering data into a CAD system and I have to transfer that to another 911 center, the 911 center may have to reenter all of that information. In the Next Generation 911 environment, you will be able to push that data and information out to as many PSAPs would be appropriate for the response of the emergency.

Mrs. Houchin. Thank you.

Mr. Wright. You know, I have learned a lot working with public safety agencies and emergency managers in Florida and South Carolina the last 10 years. Not coming from emergency management, I have learned a great deal about how critically important this interoperability is. For them to have access to that information is critically important. They can then make the proper decisions regarding alerting and advising the public. That is where the public broadcasting infrastructure comes into play, that final mile. And that is why supporting that infrastructure is so critically important for the future.

Mrs. Houchin. I guess a followup question for you, Mr. Wright, would be what -- what part,

if any, does AM radio play in that overall discussion?

Mr. Wright. It plays a huge part. You know, it is interesting. Growing up in the Midwest, as a child, I remember at night listening to stations like WLS out of Chicago and KAAY. Well, that AM technology, you know, what is old is new again when it comes to public safety. It is the most resilient infrastructure that we have. It is critically important. The AM Act, critically important for passage to support public safety.

Mrs. Houchin. And, in rural areas, fiber lines and towers are vulnerable to natural disasters, leaving communities cut off at the exact time that it could be needed most. Mr. Newton, how do you see satellite technology shaping the future of public safety communications?

Mr. Newton. I see satellite technology in two respects, one being an exigent temporary solution to spot problems that we have at issue here at this one location, that we use as a temporary solution. It is also a hardening and redundancy feature of some of these sites, especially in our most remote sites. Some of these -- in fact, one tower, it was 6 miles of debris to get to a tower. It is not practical to get to that during a disaster.

Mrs. Houchin. Thank you again for our witnesses and for your testimony. This hearing underscores how vital it is that our first responders have communications they can rely on, whether it is in rural counties in Indiana or urban centers across the country. Lives depend on these systems, and the systems must be resilient, interoperable, and secure.

I look forward to continuing the work on this issue, and I thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentleman from Ohio, Mr. Landsman, for 5 minutes.

Mr. Landsman. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you all for being here.

I want to talk about, sort of, the infrastructure that we need to invest in. And so I am just -- I am curious what you all would say, moving forward, has to be our top priorities. Obviously, I want

to get your thoughts on the public broadcasting piece and what should happen; moving forward, what you think needs to -- this Congress needs to do.

And it is not a leading question. I am curious as to what the answer is; what could some of the bipartisan solutions be? And then whether it is Next Gen 911 or the other pieces, what are -- if you were to make a list of the things that the United States Congress should be investing in, collectively, so that the system has what it needs, the next iteration, the next generation, so that we are keeping everybody safe? I am from Cincinnati. I represent both Hamilton County and Warren County in southwest Ohio and was at City Hall for a long time. And so I am deeply familiar with the importance of our emergency communication centers and what happens when things don't work out the way they are supposed to. Lives are lost, and it decimates a community.

And so, obviously, we want to constantly be getting better from how quickly we pick up the call to how quickly we get a first responder out there and, in the case of a mass event, how quickly we do everything.

So I am going to stop and just ask -- and starting with Mr. Wright, can you talk a little bit about the public broadcast- -- you have a lot, but if you had to pick, you know, your top two or three things that Congress should do moving forward, what would those be? And then what are the other capacity investments that need to be made?

Mr. Wright. You know, I -- thank you for your question.

I think the first thing is to wrestle back control of the Next Generation Warning System grant money. That is truly a bipartisan solution that for the last 3 to 4 years Congress has fully funded. And so we would hope that the funding would continue for that. But then move to deploy those funds into our public broadcasting infrastructure as quickly as possible.

Mr. Landsman. Yeah.

Mr. Wright. We have recently heard that a public broadcaster in Fairbanks, Alaska, now turns their transmitter off overnight from midnight to 6 a.m. --

Mr. Landsman. To save money?

Mr. Wright. To save money. And that is rescission related. But there are also issues related to the Next Generation Warning System for infrastructure support, and I can speak to it personally. We just put through an STA with the FCC to operate our full-power television transmitter at half power because it is out of date. It is old. We can't get parts for it any longer. We have two grant proposals in the NGWS warning system proposal system, and they remain unacted on.

Mr. Landsman. Okay.

Mr. Wright. So move on NGWS.

Mr. Landsman. Thank you. And I am going to follow up. My team will send a note, a letter, you know, just to get the ball rolling and see if there are other members of this committee that want to work with us. I suspect there will be because I do think this is bipartisan.

Yeah?

Dr. Fontes. Very simple. Fund Next Generation 911.

Mr. Landsman. Yeah.

Dr. Fontes. When we are talking about our overall public safety service at large and particularly where there is Federal involvement in funding, ensure that the authorities that are responsible for that are operating correctly functionally so that we know that the money that is available is being spent wisely and deploying the systems needed.

Mr. Landsman. Can you just say a word or two about that? I mean, is that just basic oversight, or is there something specific --

Dr. Fontes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think it is basic oversight in large part. It is just the fact that, in the case of Next Generation 911, there is no 911 office anymore at the Federal level.

Mr. Landsman. I got you. Okay. That is good to know. Thank you.

Sheriff Dicus. My comments are along the same line. Still continue to build out with

FirstNet. Anything that is priority-specific for public safety is something we need to expand upon so we don't have those commercial interruptions with other networks. And to make sure -- the governance issue that we are all talking -- a lot of you are frustrated about, you know, partisan issues and things of that nature. But, remember, when the Twin Towers fell, as it relates to law enforcement, we weren't talking to our Federal, local, and State partners. We all could have been part of the solution. We need to make sure that that continues as well so that we solve these problems and that everybody understands this isn't a red or blue issue. It is really a commonsense issue for all of the Americans across the board.

Mr. Landsman. Yeah. Well said.

Mr. Newton, 10 seconds. Sorry.

Mr. Newton. 10 seconds. Ongoing funding for especially our land mobile radio systems. The challenge we have -- it upgrades, updates, maintenance, deferred maintenance. Those are ongoing constant challenges, and we are not away from those yet. FirstNet is an adjunct to that.

Mr. Landsman. Thank you all.

I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. Excellent questions, Mr. Landsman.

I now recognize the gentleman from Texas, Mr. Goldman, for your 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. Goldman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you very much to the entire panel for being here today. When it comes down to our end of the dais, I apologize if some of the questions have been asked, for I did have to step out and take a call. So, if I am repetitive in my questions, I apologize. But, again, thank you very much for being here.

I will start with both you, Mr. Newton, and Sheriff. My staff recently toured a facility where FirstNet portable cell towers and other network assets are stored and maintained in Texas. Can you speak to whether your agencies have used portable cell towers during emergency response or

disaster planning and how they help enhance and address communications during these events? Mr. Newton, if you would like to start.

Mr. Newton. As a matter of fact, we -- my organization owns one. We deployed it 2 days ago, and it is in use right now during a search in a particularly rural area where we have a large temporary concentration of a lot of public safety. So we absolutely see the value in it and whether it is a -- an emergency or a disaster.

Mr. Goldman. All right. Thank you.

Sheriff?

Sheriff Dicus. The answer for me is also yes. We mentioned a lot of -- looking at a cell tower as being critical infrastructure and when they go down, whether it is vandalism, manmade, or natural disaster, these portable units we can bring in and still -- can continue to communicate.

And, also, when you talk about density of communication, putting those at our command centers that allows that traffic to be leveled out is really critical to things going on and things that we are responding to, almost daily.

Mr. Goldman. All right. Thank you very much.

Dr. Fontes, how critical is the strong broadband connection utilizing the fullest extent of Next Generation 911 systems?

Dr. Fontes. Well, unfortunately, Next Generation 911 systems don't exist nationwide. There are States that are in various stages of deployment of Next Generation 911 systems. Many have deployed what we call ESI nets, or emergency service internet protocol networks, that allow for the movement of information. But Next Generation 911 is so much more than that. Therefore, the information coming in from the public or sensors or anything that would come into 911 is in large part -- if there is any data or information associated with that -- would be dummied down in large part for voice communication.

Now, there are situations where some centers are capable of receiving data that would

enable our field responders to respond more effectively. It is imperative, imperative that we have Next Generation 911 deployed so that the broadband capability from the consumer, the person dialing 911, goes to a broadband Next Generation 911 system into an IP base broadband public safety communications network.

We have to make sure that all the links in the full chain of command of public safety are current in technology. Thank you.

Mr. Goldman. All right. Thank you very much.

And my final question -- I will go back to you, Sheriff. My district is home to both large urban area and rural communities. You noted in your testimony that smaller agencies often rely on larger counties for emergency communication infrastructure. What Federal steps would help ensure that Next Generation 911 deployment doesn't leave behind rural areas?

Sheriff Dicus. So it is twofold. Obviously, we have talked about funding the majority of the morning. But also having Federal-level cybersecurity audits and practices that are really DOD level, in my mind, to be able to protect those small agencies that can't afford it. In other words, if they are riding on a sheriff's backbone in some of those agencies, that we make sure that backbone is continually secured to the latest and greatest standards.

Mr. Goldman. Thank you all again. That is the end of my questioning.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. I appreciate the time. I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentlelady from Virginia, Ms. McClellan, for 5 minutes for your questions.

Ms. McClellan. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss our Nation's critical public safety communications networks at a time when natural disasters and public emergencies are becoming more commonplace.

And, as we have heard, communities rely on these systems not only in moments of crisis but

for the trust and confidence that come from knowing that help is on the way. And, as we confront more school shootings, hurricanes, and other emergencies, ensuring that our first responders have reliable, interoperable, and modern communication tools isn't a luxury. It is a necessity. And it is critically important that no community gets left behind in the transition to these tools. It could be the difference between life and death.

And yet the latest data available shows that many communities, particularly rural ones, are, in fact, left behind today. In only seven States or territories have all PSAPs fully transitioned to Next Gen 911. Four States and territories remain in the legacy stage, meaning no PSAP has transitioned. And many of these legacy systems still rely on copper, which is over a century old. The rest of the States and territories are in various states of transition.

So for each of the witnesses -- and I think I know the answer -- do you think Congress should prioritize ensuring that all roughly 5,700 primary and secondary public safety answering points should transition to Next Generation 911?

Mr. Newton. Yes.

Sheriff Dicus. Yes.

Dr. Fontes. Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Wright. Yes.

And I would also add very quickly that the University of Florida has been proactive in terms of creating products that address the very issue you were talking about with rural and underserved areas. We have deployed a new Beacon alerting channel that is dedicated to four rural counties, and it is proving to be very successful.

Ms. McClellan. Good. Thank you.

And this hearing has made clear that funding is the primary challenge for PSAPs making this transition. I think it is important to level set because it is not in the record yet that local governments are the ones that primarily own and operate these PSAPs and pay for their

establishment, their operation, their maintenance, and their transition, primarily through general funds and, in many cases, local or State-imposed surcharges. And, unfortunately, our localities, as we have heard, just don't have the funding to make these upgrades.

This year, the House majority had several chances to stand with rural communities and improve our communications infrastructure, but they didn't. They could have used spectrum auction proceeds to fund Next Gen 911, but they didn't. They could have pushed back on the administration's delays in broadband deployment, which is necessary to close the digital divide so that more people can see the benefits of Next Gen 911, but they didn't. They could have opposed cuts to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting which administers the Next Generation Warning System grant programs, but they didn't.

For all of the witnesses, do you agree that these issues are all interconnected and that without them, rural communities will be left behind?

Mr. Newton. Yes.

Sheriff Dicus. Yes. We are talking about a number of things here this morning, but even legacy systems remaining, modernizing a number of things, and it really is an all-in approach.

Ms. McClellan. Yes.

Dr. Fontes. Yes.

Mr. Wright. Yes.

Ms. McClellan. And, while Congress last estimated that the cost to transition all PSAPs to Next Gen 911 in 2018, I think we all agree that the costs have likely gone up in the last 7 years, at a minimum through inflation and the cost of labor. But tariffs are also having an impact on the cost as they -- and raising supply chain issues for copper, for those PSAPs that are still on legacy systems, for fiberoptic components, PVCs, and other installation materials.

And I don't have enough time, maybe, for a full answer, but Sheriff Dicus, I want to elaborate a little bit. You touched on the critical role that Next Gen 911 could play in response to school

shootings. Can you elaborate a little more specifically on how important it is to save lives in that situation?

Sheriff Dicus. Sure. So what I am talking to is primarily intelligence, both things that are going on at the school prior to the event even happening, and when you are talking about a realtime crime center or some of these technological advances we are talking about, is being able to feed that first responder what is the picture they are dealing with, what was before, who showed up, and what is going on.

Ms. McClellan. And, specifically, they need to see video.

Sheriff Dicus. Video certainly helps. And sometimes it is the video that the 911 dispatcher is receiving or a realtime crime center that is being translated what is being seen to the person that is trying to drive to get there.

Ms. McClellan. But it is more than just a voice on the phone explaining what is happening.

Sheriff Dicus. Yeah, absolutely. We live in a modern age where pictures, video, and a number of things we are all operating on -- frankly, used to operating on with our cell phones, and first responders are no different. The more information, the better.

Ms. McClellan. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentleman from Florida, Mr. Dunn, for your 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. Dunn. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the first responders who volunteered your time to be here with us today. Your service is greatly appreciated.

This is the first in a series of hearings we will be doing on emergency communications this year. Programs like the First Responder Network, FirstNet, and Next Gen 911 are essential in Florida.

My district, Florida's Second Congressional District, makes up most of the panhandle, and we are no strangers to preparing and responding to natural disasters. Additionally, my district is home

to some of the most frequented beaches, which requires emergency responders to lead in protocols, preparation, response, resources, for all kinds of emergencies.

In 2018, Hurricane Michael made landfall in my district as a cat 5, and it destroyed everything in its path, and we are still rebuilding 7 years later.

And then we had Hurricanes Ian, Idalia, and most recently, Helene. All made landfall in our district. So the unfortunate truth is that, you know, our -- during Hurricane Michael, our sheriff's department -- everybody in our county -- everybody in 12 counties lost all communications. Cell phones, land lines, even police repeaters went down.

So the Bay County Sheriff's Office had to make a critical decision to switch to FirstNet right after the storm, and, fortunately, they were connected almost immediately. However, witnesses here have mentioned that different areas have different coverage capabilities, and interoperability is still very essential.

So, while some sheriff's offices are using FirstNet or AT&T, others are using Verizon, other carriers. On the other hand, the Next Gen 911 program has helped streamline our tech advantages for our call centers. And thanks to these programs, as we have talked about, we have had -- now we have video and text capability -- not just text but video capabilities as well.

Sheriff Dicus, you recounted that, as a result of California's opt-in to FirstNet, San Bernardino received five new FirstNet tower sites. We have had similar accounts in Florida. As we look at reauthorizing the FirstNet program, can you explain your thoughts on the importance of the creation of FirstNet after the 9/11 terrorist attacks? And do you believe that the program was a necessary catalyst for building the emergency networks around the country?

Sheriff Dicus. So I will work your question backward, but absolutely. When we talk about interoperability -- and it is an opportunity to build out -- no matter the buildout that we have already discussed, where FirstNet is at this point, there is still vulnerabilities, and there is still gaps. We have a voice at the table. And where do we start filling in those gaps to be able to take care of the

public?

Mr. Dunn. Can you enumerate a few of those gaps?

Sheriff Dicus. Sure. In my area, some of these things -- even Federal land -- Mount Baldy is a popular hiking area. And, as part of FirstNet, we were actually able to get a cell tower there for all the hikers that are coming from the Los Angeles space and being able to use that cell tower for emergency purposes. And, as the sheriff, I am mandated to do search and rescue responsibilities in the State of California. So that is the only way in which I can get to them rather than using the traditional ground-pounders where somebody realized somebody didn't return home. It is more immediate.

Mr. Dunn. I have to tell you, the sheriffs were -- in my district are -- I have 16 of them. They are outstanding.

Sir, as a user of FirstNet, have you had interactions or conversations regarding the program or oversight of the programs from anyone from NTIA, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, that oversees this program? And what from these conversations are you at liberty to share for our purposes as factfinding oversight organization?

Sheriff Dicus. That is for me or --

Mr. Dunn. Yeah, for you, Sheriff.

Sheriff Dicus. So, in terms of my staff that works with those folks as they roll this out and the governing agencies, we have had nothing but positive contacts other than there is so much more needed to be able to fill the gaps that we talked about earlier.

Mr. Dunn. So we would love to help you fill those gaps. Please communicate with us.

I have a number of other questions for other members of the panel, and obviously my time is expiring. But this is a fascinating discussion. It is important. And it is certainly close to our hearts in Florida where we experience a lot of natural disasters.

Thank you, gentlemen, all for attending today. Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentlelady from Florida, Ms. Castor, for 5 minutes to ask your questions.

Ms. Castor. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for calling this hearing. And thank you to all of the witnesses and all of the first responders who are there every single day to keep us safe, safe and well.

And, for Mr. Wright, I am sorry that -- I have learned a lot about your commitment to the Florida Public Radio Emergency Network and BEACON. But I have also learned today before we came into the hearing room that you are the voice of Florida Gator football. You are the PA announcer. And I am really sorry that Congressman Bilirakis and Congresswoman Cammack are not here to hear me say, "Go bulls," because that was an extraordinary event. I am sure there was some emergency Gator signal sent up for that loss on Saturday.

Mr. Wright. I clearly understood earlier how to turn my mike on and off. But I -- but thank you, Congresswoman. I appreciate your sentiment.

Ms. Castor. Yeah.

But here we are. We are about to come into the 1-year anniversary of Hurricanes Helene and Milton. And, in my neck of the woods in the Tampa Bay area, that was the worst catastrophe we have experienced in anyone's memory. During that time, after Helene, 1.3 million people lost power, and then Milton was right on its heels where over 3.4 million Floridians lost power. And it is giving me some flashbacks because what -- what happened also was we couldn't get oil tankers in. So there was no fuel. We had police guarding gas stations. So people didn't have power. They didn't have gas. They didn't have internet. So what they relied on is just what you said, the over -- over-the-air broadcast radio.

And I remember very well digging out my old Walkman with batteries, and I could listen to all of the updates; the bridges that were open, the ones that were closed, food distribution. And that helped me as a public servant to get that important information out to my neighbors.

So I am so grateful for what has happened over time in building that network. It is not easy. But it really is a model. It can't -- you know, your phone -- you are not going to be able to charge your phone in a catastrophe like that. So the satellite networks are important. Everyone has said we need redundant systems. But I found, in the immediate aftermath of a catastrophe, with no power and no internet, it is the public radio network.

So what are the lessons for other communities? Because you have worked with our Florida Department of Emergency Management for years to develop that network. What are the -- what are the lessons learned that you can share with the rest of the country on building those networks out?

Mr. Wright. Well, I think, you know, one of the best lessons that we have learned in Florida is that we are better together than we are separate. And what I mean by that is that we have an infrastructure in place through the broadcast infrastructure with public stations around the entire Nation. And so the Florida model that we have deployed into South Carolina as well through our partnership with South Carolina ETV and public radio, same exact model. Very efficient. In fact, one of the recognitions that I am most proud of is a Florida TaxWatch award for productivity and efficiency --

Ms. Castor. Wait. They are a very, very, very Conservative group in Florida.

Mr. Wright. I appreciate you recognizing that. That is why that award is center in my office because it speaks volumes about the work that we are doing and the importance of that work.

And I think that we are uniquely positioned at this moment in time to take advantage of that infrastructure, to reinvest in it, to ensure that when the next hurricane comes in or the next wildfire event happens, that that communications infrastructure for the last mile is there, and then that we are utilizing innovation solutions like FPREN and BEACON to get those alerts out to the public when they need them most.

Yes, enhanced 911, critically important. But the work from those agencies out to the public,

that is just as important. That is another piece of the chain that we cannot forget.

Ms. Castor. It is all that coordination because in a catastrophe and emergencies they are locally managed, State coordinated, and federally supported. And it seems like what we are missing right now is the Federal supportive piece of it, to take a hatchet to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting that puts those grants at risk, for the infrastructure we need, the Federal grants, not to mention all of the resiliency grants, all of the attacks on Federal Emergency Management Agency. FEMA needs reform, but it can't be eliminated. We would be -- everyone would be in dire straits.

Mr. Wright. We have a proven model. In public broadcasting, we have made the investments in the past. We need to continue making those. And I think it was Tip O'Neill who used to say that all politics is local. All alerting is local. And that is where the public broadcasters come in to play.

Ms. Castor. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentleman from South Carolina, Mr. Fry, for 5 minutes to ask your questions.

Mr. Fry. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for having this very important and vital hearing today.

Thank you to our witnesses for your candid and accurate testimony.

Public safety is critically important to me, especially as a Representative of a coastal district in South Carolina. For us, storms like hurricanes are not "if" but "when." And when disaster strikes, communication is not just important; it is lifesaving. In August, I had the privilege of visiting the Marion County Sheriff's Office in my district to learn firsthand about the role that programs like FirstNet play in supporting our first responders. And what I saw was encouraging. But I think it underscores how critically reliable communications are so important when disaster hits.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter to our first responders -- it doesn't matter to our first responders who is providing them with the service but if the service is being provided. Emergencies can happen in an instant, and it is our duty in Congress to make sure and to -- that those who are on the ground have the necessary tools they need to do their jobs effectively, securely, and without delay.

Sheriff, we will start with you. As you know, FirstNet was established by Congress to give our first responders a dedicated nationwide broadband network. AT&T currently operates under that authority.

At the same time, providers like Verizon and T-Mobile are doing their own thing, offering public safety services. So, from your experience on the ground, how do you see these different offerings working together in practice? And what steps should Congress consider to ensure that the focus stays on the reliability and interoperability for our first responders?

Sheriff Dicus. So, to your question, we are an agency that is an example of exactly what you are asking. Our county is so vast; we can't just rely just on FirstNet because of cell tower coverage in other places. So our computers automatically do a strength test essentially that is constantly happening while a sheriff's deputy drives around. And, whichever service provider is the strongest signal, that is the one the computer automatically goes with.

So they are working together in those aspects. I think what we are talking about is really reliability when we need it, and we are talking about the amount of traffic during an emergency that may go over one of those systems where FirstNet is exclusive to public safety. And that is certainly why we would like to see the buildout continue.

Mr. Fry. Thank you for that.

You have also highlighted both the successes and challenges with FirstNet's rollout, including the reinvestment of funds into new infrastructure, but also the risks from outages, vandalism, and cyber attacks. Looking ahead, what steps should Congress prioritize to ensure reliability and

resiliency in these networks, particularly as FirstNet authority approaches its 2027 sunset date?

Sheriff Dicus. Certainly start looking at particularly FirstNet towers and those that are specific to public safety as critical infrastructure. So, in other words, there are security aspects, maybe even the way they are designed and building. We have had a lot of talk this morning about copper and getting cut, for instance. Fiber is no different. And, actually, in some cases, I think it is harder to repair fiber. At least that has been our experience. So physical security and then cybersecurity are number one priorities. And, if we can use the Federal Government's help to do that, I think we are in the right place.

Mr. Fry. Thank you for that.

We frequently discuss AI and its potential impact on this committee. Emergency communications are no different. AI will change the game. Dr. Fontes, you also note that Next Generation 911 will allow Americans to send texts, images, videos, and other forms of data directly to call centers, data that could be enhanced or triaged through AI tools. How do you see AI shaping the effectiveness of Next Generation 911 in practice? And what safeguards should Congress consider to ensure that this technology strengthens rather than complicates the emergency response system?

Dr. Fontes. Thank you for your question.

AI is beginning to enter into the 911 space. In the Next Generation 911 environment, when data are allowed to come in to 911 centers, videos, et cetera, the use of AI, as I would envision it, would allow us to either have supporting tools that may hear or see something that the human ear or eye cannot see or hear. And so, therefore, it may provide more correct situational issues, enabling the field responders to know what they are going into when they respond to that emergency.

I think there is also a variety of opportunities dealing with language translations, transcripts, record maintenance, and the backroom aspects of Next Generation or 911 systems at large. But you need that Next Generation 911 system to have that data flow into the 911 centers.

So that is one of the fundamental aspects, I believe, is critical to the use of advanced technologies like AI in serving the best possible 911 service to the public.

Mr. Fry. Thank you for that.

Mr. Chairman, I see my time has expired, and I yield back.

Mr. Hudson. Thank you.

I now recognize the gentlelady from California, Ms. Barragan, for 5 minutes to ask your questions.

Ms. Barragan. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First, Sheriff, I want to take a moment to thank you for your statement and for your position and following the law in California, and for your statement of how it is so important that, when you protect the community, you protect everybody regardless of immigration status. So I know you -- you took some heat for that, and I appreciate that you are looking through the lens of protecting everybody and that you do not ask about status or require proof of citizenship to file a report or to make a call. When somebody sees a crime, we want them to call 911. We want them to report it and to work with you. So I want to start by thanking you for that.

Sheriff, I also want to ask you, do you think that there is a benefit to funding the Corporation for Public Broadcasting?

Sheriff Dicus. I think this is an all-hands approach. And, if you heard my testimony today, if these systems are redundant to each other, whether it is the AM radio system, we never know -- we don't have the benefit of knowing in any disaster what is actually going to happen, and the fact we would have redundancies with all those systems -- I am telling you, public safety -- if we have to get the can and string out, we are going to do it to protect the public.

Ms. Barragan. Okay. But it is a simple question. Do you think there is a benefit at all to funding it?

Sheriff Dicus. I do think there is a benefit to funding it because it may be the only resource

that we can communicate over should everything else go down.

Ms. Barragan. Great. Yeah. I also noticed that you were a guest on the "Inland Edition," which is PBS, to talk about law enforcement for community members. I am assuming there is a positive benefit to the community for you going on and doing that show?

Sheriff Dicus. Particularly as it relates to the economic engine in my county and how it works and to be able to take law enforcement executives to understand that and know how to protect it.

Ms. Barragan. Thank you.

Because we know that, when disaster strikes, every second counts. And, right now, our emergency communication systems are at risk of failing. And the Next Generation Warning System is central to keeping community safe. Sheriff, if you had $88 billion, would you spend some of that money to invest in Next Gen 911?

Sheriff Dicus. Absolutely.

Ms. Barragan. That is the answer I hope every Republican would have had. But you know what? They didn't do it. When they passed their so-called Big, Beautiful Bill, which is a big, ugly bill, they really abandoned a bipartisan agreement to invest in programs like Next Gen 911 as a result of money raised from a spectrum auction. And that is why you are hearing so much about it today, because there is an opportunity -- there is $88 billion going to be raised from this auction. And House Republicans are refusing to put money from those proceeds into things like this, which, as we have heard today, is lifesaving. It is so critical, and it is so necessary -- just like when every House Republican voted against the American Rescue Plan, something else you and San Bernardino County have benefitted from. I have seen the Valley Communications Center in San Bernardino recently opened up, and you praised it as something that is going to help benefit public safety and response time. So thank you for taking positions and making sure you are putting safety first.

We know that the rescissions at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting have put in jeopardy

the mission of these grant programs to help local broadcasters serve as lifelines during emergencies. Right now, in Louisiana, a station can't replace an aging transmitter which has put emergency alerts at risk in a hurricane-prone area. In Montana, a rural station faces failing equipment and likely loss of service, leaving remote communications without reliable alerts. In central Florida, a station has been forced to postpone critical equipment upgrades and is down to a single engineer, jeopardizing emergency broadcast in another hurricane-prone region. Without Next Gen, outdated equipment leaves communities blind to disaster, and this is unacceptable.

Mr. Wright, with CBP no longer administering the Next Gen -- or the NGWS grants, what happens to rural and underserved communities if FEMA fails to ensure that program funding reaches local broadcasters?

Mr. Wright. They suffer.

Ms. Barragan. What does --

Mr. Wright. They will not receive the alerting that they desperately need.

Ms. Barragan. And what does that mean for communities?

Mr. Wright. It degradates the culture within that community. It puts the citizens of that community in peril. And that is what the public broadcasters across the United States are trying to solve to, through the various projects that we work on like FPREN and BEACON. But the funding support for the infrastructure is absolutely critical.

Ms. Barragan. Great. Thank you.

This is why I worked with Congressman Menendez and McClain Delaney to a letter to FEMA, which we sent this morning, urging the agency to share a clear plan to maintain the NGWS funding for local broadcasters and ensure continuity of service to rural underserved communities.

And, with that, I thank all the witnesses. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. Kean. [Presiding.] Thank you.

The gentlewoman yields back.

The chair now recognizes the gentlewoman from Florida for 5 minutes.

Mrs. Cammack. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Wright, it is good to see you. Go Gators. I am disappointed, no orange and blue tie. Dr. Fontes is repping for you, though.

Mr. Wright. It is blue. The doctor and I, you know, we coordinated today for you.

Mrs. Cammack. I appreciate that, even though I know we had a little bit of a rough weekend, and I heard our -- my colleague, Representative Castor, was giving us a bit of grief, but we are Gators so --

Mr. Wright. But we appreciate her sensitivity to the Gator nation.

Mrs. Cammack. That is right. That is right.

But I also want to acknowledge all our first responders in the room. Thank you all so much for your service and for your family's service. As the wife of a firefighter, SWAT medic, I know firsthand what it is like, and so deeply grateful for everything that y'all do.

I am also disappointed in some of the very divisive and partisan language that I just heard from my colleague on the other side of the aisle. Emergency communications, it is not a Republican or a Democrat issue. It is an American issue. And so I am just a little disappointed that it has to turn into a food fight.

But we are here because we have a real issue that we have to solve. We need to figure out a way to update our systems. And, as a Floridian, I have seen time and time again how vital our reliable communications are during a disaster and truly how scary it can be when they go down. So, whether it is a hurricane knocking on our door that is taking out our power and cell sites, or Federal and local responders struggling to operate on the same systems, these gaps can really mean the difference between life or death. Certainly, as someone who represents a district that saw three major hurricanes in the span of 13 months, we know this firsthand.

Of course, Florida faces unique challenges. From protecting our seniors in rural communities to keeping millions of our visitors safe every year, this conversation on strengthening public safety communications, whether it is 911 systems, FirstNet, or other tools, it is critical.

So, having worked those storms, I can say confidently that we need to take an above-all approach when it comes to building out the systems, updating them, and building in redundancies.

I am so excited for today's conversation because it is something that is long overdue. We need a system that is resilient, interoperable, and secure when it comes to the issues in communications that matter most.

So I am going to start with you, Sheriff. One of the promises that Next Gen 911 has is the ability to transmit texts, images, video, and location data directly to first responders in the field. I can't tell you how many times my husband has been on one system, and he is a city, you know -- he works for the city -- but then the county is operating on a different system, and maybe there is a mutual aid call coming in from a neighboring county. Some are on FLURS; some are on a different bandwidth. It is tough. And I can tell you firsthand some of the challenges that we have seen with FirstNet in our rural communities.

So what steps can Congress take to ensure nationwide interoperability amongst all of the different networks that our first responders operate on so that they can move seamlessly amongst jurisdictions, especially during large-scale disasters?

Sheriff Dicus. Well, your example with your husband is very pertinent to this when you are talking about even between fire, sheriff's departments, and police departments. So interoperability by having that common platform, FirstNet or broadband just for public safety, is first and foremost.

A lot of the modern technologies, both in our handheld radios as well as when we use our cell phones to talk to each other, have the ability to automatically recognize jurisdictional boundaries and then make those connections. Some of it can be done in our dispatch centers. There is technology that allows two disparate radio systems to be plugged in, and now they can turn around

and communicate with each other.

I think ensuring simple, straightforward technologies like that and providing really the governance and policy language from the Federal level across the board will allow us to standardize to make sure that we continue to move in the direction you are describing.

Mrs. Cammack. I love that. I love that, especially since these are very expensive systems. You know, you have got people investing millions and millions of dollars to upgrade their system only to find that they can't communicate just even a few counties over. So that is really important.

And then my next question is going to be on FirstNet. So the FirstNet authority recently held a workshop in our district to solicit feedback on the priorities from our first responders. In the most recent storm, the minute I got out of my home county, Alachua County, heading west towards the hurricane where it had hit the hardest, my husband immediately lost coverage. I don't have FirstNet, and I didn't have coverage. So this is something that I brought to their attention.

Now, I understand that these individuals are best positioned to help guide infrastructure needs in our communities, but how has your experience been in getting the infrastructure placed where you need it in an emergency situation as it relates to FirstNet?

Sheriff Dicus. In terms of the portability of, like, FirstNet mobile towers and things like that, it is good. They respond. However, what you are talking about is the physical tower itself going down, and that is what your husband experienced.

Mrs. Cammack. Right.

Sheriff Dicus. Number one, construction standards, making these things resilient. Also calling it is what it is -- critical infrastructure across the United States -- securing it, maintaining it, and monitoring it.

Mrs. Cammack. And I know I am over my time, but at some point, I would like to get on the record some commentary on redundancies and moving away from singular prime towers. I think that that is a disaster in the making. So I will follow up with all of you. But thank you again for

each of you being here today. I appreciate you. And go Gators.

Mr. Kean. The gentlewoman from Florida yields back.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from California, Mr. Obernolte.

Mr. Obernolte. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I would like to thank the committee chairman for holding this hearing on what I consider to be a critically important topic.

Sheriff Dicus, welcome back to Washington, D.C. San Bernardino County is the largest part of my district, and you have been a great leader for our county and our law enforcement agencies. So thanks for your continued presence and your voice here.

I wanted to ask you about one of the major challenges that we always have in districts like mine where 78 percent of the land is federally managed, and that creates real challenges when we need to quickly deploy temporary communications infrastructure and response to an emergency, or when we are trying to deploy more permanent communications infrastructure to prepare for emergencies.

So can you talk about any obstacles that you have faced in trying to get deployable equipment on federally managed land or trying to build permanent infrastructure on federally managed land?

RPTR SINKFIELD

EDTR ZAMORA

[1:14 p.m.]

Sheriff Dicus. Governance in real estate, two of the biggest things when we are talking about communications and expanding across. But in a lot of instances, maybe the U.S. Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management, may have repeaters to use on their own radio systems. Common sense would be sharing those towers and really that infrastructure to be able to continue -- whether it is a FirstNet system or a county-operated 800-megahertz system. We have experienced barriers, and it is usually bureaucracy are those barriers.

If we can actually put the people who are in charge of those systems and understand that we need to back each other up -- and I know you are familiar with this, but in our Barstow area, it is a 5,000 square mile beat for one deputy. Their backup is a BLM Ranger or a CHB officer on the freeway, and we all have to be able to interoperate. But if it is bureaucracy, we need to fix that. We need to make it straight through. And there are some commonsense approaches. Communication is communication.

Mr. Obernolte. Right. Well, that is why we are all here having this discussion.

I also was very interested in your testimony about the need to establish cybersecurity standards. And I know that the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department had a cybersecurity incident several years ago. Can you talk a little bit about that incident, the way it affected your capabilities, and how cybersecurity standards like the ones you are advocating for would have helped?

Sheriff Dicus. That ransomware attack probably was -- in my entire career, and I have been doing this for almost 35 years now -- affected the brand of the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department in the way we deliver customer service, which we take great pride in doing it. We also had to rely on a number of our other agencies that weren't affected by this. And you have to understand -- let

me see if I can put everybody as quickly as possible into the driver seat of what the sheriff has.

You have an insurance company that comes in that becomes the quarterback of this, but yet as the sheriff you are going after the threat actors who did this to you. You want to go out and make arrests and do those types of things. Internationally, that is an impossible issue for a sheriff. But then you call in your three-letter agencies that come in and support you on that, but yet you also have the responsibility to get back the data on behalf of your constituents, both the victims, the suspects, and your employees. It puts you in this untenable situation.

In order to prevent that, we need to have the best standards, DOD-type standards, to secure our information. There is a lot of basics in how you operate this. But as threat actors become more sophisticated, we need to be on the cutting edge of that to protect ourselves.

Mr. Obernolte. Thank you, Sheriff Dicus. It is great to see you again.

Dr. Fontes, I found your testimony very compelling on the need for Next Generation 9-1-1. And I think everyone here on the dais would completely agree that this is something that we have to get across the finish line.

As part of your testimony, you were discussing the need to stop continually coming up with cost estimates and actually move into implementation. But from our point of view, part of the problem is that the latest cost estimate -- I think you cited in your testimony -- is adjusted for inflation, $15 billion.

So my question is, you know, as a technologist myself, these call centers, they already have computers, they already have communications. From my standpoint, Next Gen 9-1-1 is just software. It is software on the consumer side, maybe with the cell phone operators, and it is software on the call center side.

How on Earth does it cost $15 billion? I mean, where does that money go if it is just software that we are talking about?

Dr. Fontes. Oh, thank you. I appreciate your question.

I would contend that it isn't just software. Many of our 9-1-1 centers don't even have broadband capabilities. So there is that connectivity issue that has to take place. There also has to be the technology in the centers to enable the utilization of data and information coming in. And a lot of these centers don't have that type of technology that would enable what I call information-rich or data-rich 9-1-1 calls.

So if it were just a computer solution, it would have been there a long time ago. It is far more than that. It is planning, it is coordination at State level, it is backroom management of information and data and files and records, and the list goes on.

You know, hopefully, you will have an opportunity to, if you haven't already, been to a -- go to a 9-1-1 center and see what it is that is going on there and to ask them how this project that they are engaged in is different than the legacy 9-1-1 systems we have today.

Mr. Obernolte. Sure. No, I have done that and I have asked that.

Dr. Fontes. Yeah.

Mr. Obernolte. And the centers that I went in had broadband and had computers. So, you know, as a software guy myself, this seems like a software problem. It sure seems like we should be able to solve it for less than $15 billion. But I welcome the continued discussion. I see we are out of time.

Dr. Fontes. Welcome that.

Mr. Obernolte. I yield back.

Mr. Joyce. [Presiding.] The gentleman yields.

The chair recognizes the gentleman from New Jersey, Mr. Kean, for his 5 minutes of questioning.

Mr. Kean. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today.

As we hold this hearing on public safety communications, we are only 2 days away from the

24th anniversary of the September 11 attacks. And when those planes hit those towers, the communications, emergency, and otherwise went down immediately.

New Jersey also, uniquely, is subject to many national weather phenomena, whether it was Superstorm Sandy, Hurricane Irene, Ida, and so many others that have hit New Jersey since 2001. So we are uniquely aware as citizens that we need to make sure that all of our communications are secure, redundant, and whether they be broadband, whether they be AM radio, whether they be -- any -- whatever the next generation of telecommunications it is, we need to make sure that the communications between the people who are going into harm's way to protect our fellow citizens or the communication with the families at home who are being impacted, small businesses, well, we need to make sure that they have information quickly and accurate information as well.

And as we are looking about how we evaluate and update these emergency communications and public safety communications, we need to make sure that the authorities are dynamic and responsive, and we need to make sure that the needs of the first responders are central to these missions.

One of the primary concerns I hear from first responders in my district is about the importance of interoperability. And having been a volunteer firefighter and an EMT myself, I -- which I suspect if you polled the room of firefighters, police officers, and emergency medical professionals as well, that they would want to make sure that there is a product that is reliable, that fits the budget, and is compatible with the equipment that they may already have.

So, Sheriff Dicus, as we continue to improve our public safety communications, what can we do to make sure that we are keeping our primary focus on the needs of the first responders who are already having to do more with less?

Sheriff Dicus. So we are talking about basic communication, and I like how you started with what happened on September 11. Out of a lot of those studies, those local, State, and Federal were not communicating. So that is talking on a face-to-face basis, of course. And now we are talking

about that interoperability question you asked.

So whether we are talking about a legacy system, an 800-megahertz system, there are technologies that, as my colleague Dr. Fontes has said, IP-based that allow those systems to communicate with each other, more importantly, automatically so that the first responder doesn't have to change to a repeater or something along those lines, and those technologies exist.

Being able to fund those, FirstNet having that common picture in terms of broadband, those are critical to allow the folks to do their job really seamlessly without having to think twice about how to make those connections themselves.

Mr. Kean. Thank you. Thank you for that answer.

Mr. Newton, during the attacks on September 11, communication networks were either knocked out completely or they were quickly overloaded, resulting in a complete communications breakdown. How have priority and preemption increased your ability to respond to large-scale emergencies and maintain situational awareness among first responders?

Mr. Newton. Specifically with the features of priority and preemption -- and priority means that we will continue to have access to these -- this advanced data, the streams of video, and the information that we need to make good decisions, as well as preemption or ruthless preemption. Whereas, short of it being a 9-1-1 call, our call is more important than whatever else is going on there. And that is what it allows us to do. It allow us to make those links. It allows me to call for help and say I need these resources to come help me manage this incident.

Mr. Kean. Thank you.

And, Sheriff Dicus, in your testimony, you mentioned land mobile radio. Can you discuss how your department uses land mobile radio, and do you believe that mobile provider services will replace land mobile radio?

Sheriff Dicus. So as of right now -- and this is obviously a technological argument in public safety circles -- you need both, because you can't depend on one or the other at least at this point.

Some day, as FirstNet and things advance, we may be able to rely on them. But right now in a county the size of San Bernardino, and what many sheriffs deal with with these large counties, it is a better position to have both.

Mr. Kean. Okay. Thank you all for your time, your insights, and for making the time to be here today.

I yield back.

Mr. Joyce. The gentleman yields.

The chair recognizes the gentleman from California, Mr. Mullin, for his 5 minutes of questioning.

Mr. Mullin. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I want to thank all of our witnesses for your testimony today and for what you do to keep our communities safe.

Last week, I introduced bipartisan legislation, the Resilience Emergency Alert Communications and Training Act, or REACT Act. And I appreciate the support of my colleague, Mr. Weber of Texas, by the way of his cosponsorship to make it bipartisan.

This bill would provide technical and financial assistance to State, local, and Tribal authorities to conduct end-to-end testing and community-based exercises of warning systems. It is a simple idea. We want the Federal Government to support our local emergency managers so that they are ready to alert the public when disaster strikes.

Mr. Newton, you have had firsthand experience leading communities through disasters. In your experience responding to these disasters, what are the biggest barriers to sending clear, effective alerts quickly, and what kind of preparation do local communities need to overcome those challenges? I know that is a broad question there, but if you could address that.

Mr. Newton. Thank you. I think the first of these is the obstacle of the costs. It is the obstacle of the software. What platform are you going to use to actually activate the system?

Typically, those are not a one-time cost. It is more of a subscription. So that is the first obstacle.

I think the other challenge we have is we focus so much on the technology that allows us to do the alerting that we don't take the time to really focus in on -- there is a person that actually has to ingest information, make a decision, maybe determine do they have the authorities to make certain decisions, and then act on those decisions.

I think one of the challenges -- I have done this for a long time, but yet that is one of the more stressful things in my job is to actually set off an alert and craft a message that is both relevant and meaningful and actionable. And so at this point there is actually a resource out of University of Albany, a dashboard that helps you craft effective messaging. And so I think that is the challenge. Then I think, in line with what you are suggesting, we have got to practice. We have got to train, we have got to practice, and you got to keep practicing.

Mr. Mullin. I appreciate that answer very much, Mr. Newton.

My next question is to Mr. Wright. You have led the development of emergency alerting systems, including BEACON. As I understand it, this tool and other third-party commercial emergency alerting systems often rely on Federal alerting infrastructure, whether it is IPAWS, EAS, or WEA, or public broadcasting transmitters and towers.

So, Mr. Wright, I am wondering why so many communities use third-party alert and warning systems. Could you describe what gaps remain in public alerting tools and how we can close those gaps?

Mr. Wright. Thank you for your question, Congressman. It was actually music to my ears to hear that you are using The Warn Room resources to help your agency learn how to craft more effective alerts.

At the University of Florida and through the public broadcasting infrastructure, our job is to take those alerts that are coming directly from the agencies at the county, State, and Federal levels, and then transmit those out to the public as quickly and as efficiently as possible. That is our role in

the overall alerting ecosphere.

We have developed an extraordinary partnership with the Florida Division of Emergency Management at the State level, but then also at the local level with county level emergency managers to ensure that they know that they have a trusted partner in the alerting process and that they can depend on their local public broadcaster to get their information out exactly as they have crafted it. That is really the value of BEACON.

One of them is that it is taking your exact messaging, and then the AI is translating that exactly as it is put into the system, and then it is broadcast out on the BEACON system 24/7. It is truly the first alerting device or channel anywhere in the world, and it is already proven to be very effective.

Mr. Mullin. Thank you for that. And as I close, I just want to underscore the points you made earlier in the hearing.

Earlier this year, I co-led a bipartisan appropriations request to support FEMA's Next Generation Warning System's program, but the majority and the Trump administration just rescinded funding for the Corporation of Public Broadcasting, and as a direct result it can no longer administer those grants. That decision means emergency alerts won't get to those who need them most. This is the opposite, in my opinion, of what we need to be doing.

So I thank you all again for your testimony, for being here.

And with that I yield back.

Mr. Joyce. The gentleman yields.

I now yield myself 5 minutes for questioning.

First of all, thanks to the panel for being here today.

Accessibility to emergency response services is critical in rural communities where connection can sometimes be disrupted and sometimes outright unavailable. Improved coordination of emergency responders is essential as public safety communication services are further developed to

address the needs of these rural communities.

There are more than 2,100 agencies in Pennsylvania, and that represents thousands of FirstNet connections. This underscores the need for Congress to reauthorize FirstNet's authority.

The district that I am honored to represent includes 12 rural counties in Pennsylvania, from the Battlefields of Gettysburg in Adams County to close to the Flight 93 Memorial in Somerset County. My district has geographical barriers that create problems for first responders trying to communicate in times of crisis, as well as constituents trying to access emergency response services by making a 9-1-1 call.

Sheriff Dicus, you mentioned in your testimony that you and members of your association serve vast rural territories. Can you elaborate on communication challenges that these law enforcement officers and first responders face in these rural communities?

Sheriff Dicus. Sure. In these rural communities, and I am talking in excess of like a 3.5 hour drive time, there are not infrastructure things in the ground where we are talking about fiber. We are talking about, in some cases, cell towers, that is how remote these places are. So to be able to communicate, you develop -- or you rely on your legacy system which is 800-megahertz system.

In the past -- they have since advanced. But in the past, the law enforcement officer would actually know the boundaries of that radio system to be able to switch to and from repeaters. And I am glad to report to you today, now that occurs automatically. But that ends up being the only reliable communication source. Having something like FirstNet expanded would now allow for that redundancy and the use of the computer, not just the handheld radio.

Mr. Joyce. Sheriff, how can Congress ensure that rural communities -- and yours being very similar to mine -- how can we ensure that first responders have access to the most cutting-edge communications technology and infrastructure that is possible?

Previously in this hearing you stated that urban communities often have more access to the funds than rural communities have. Would you please explain further?

Sheriff Dicus. A lot of the formulas that are related to funding across the board, whether you are talking about Homeland Security grant funding, they are related usually to population. And, of course, the rural areas are going to suffer just as a result of their population.

I think we need to take into account critical infrastructure across the board and really standardize communication for all. It is important to everybody to be able to have -- to make a 9-1-1 call.

Mr. Joyce. Thank you.

Just 2 months ago in Pennsylvania, we experienced significant statewide 9-1-1 disruptions. Some callers who dialed 9-1-1 in an emergency situation experienced that their calls were not delivered to 9-1-1 operators. According to Pennsylvania's Emergency Management Agency, the cause of the outages within the Next Gen 9-1-1 system was a defect in the operating system. A wireless emergency alert issued to the public notified the individuals to call their local 9-1-1 center directly or to call the local nonemergency line. In a true emergency, locating these numbers can waste precious time. This intermittent outage lasted for several hours.

Dr. Fontes, can you speak on the safeguards in place to address an outage in the Next Gen 9-1-1 system like the one that recently occurred in Pennsylvania?

Dr. Fontes. Thank you. I think it is important to recognize the Next Generation 9-1-1 has built into its purposes the idea of resiliency. So if the center were to go down, the ability to move 9-1-1 communications to other centers to be able to respond to the emergency, with the data that is available to that community that went down, will better serve the public and provide the continuance of 9-1-1 service.

Mr. Joyce. I think you have outlined what is so important. What has been so important to this hearing is the continuance, the ability to have that overlap to serve 9-1-1 emergencies.

As we work to address connectivity for constituents and for first responders across the country, it is important that we prioritize bringing this connection to rural communities. It is equally

as important that we build a functional system that works to provide emergency response services without failure. Americans need the reliable connection that they can depend on in times of medical need and in times of disaster. And this includes the first responders that we count on each and every hour of each and every day.

Thank you all for being present today. I yield back.

Seeing that there are no further members wishing to be recognized, I would like to thank our witnesses for being here today.

I ask unanimous consent to insert in the record the documents included on the staff hearing documents list. Without objection, this will be the order.

I remind members that they have 10 business days to submit questions for the record and I ask the witnesses to respond to these questions promptly.

Members should submit their questions by close of business on Tuesday, September 23.

And without objection, the subcommittee is adjourned.

[The information follows:]

******** COMMITTEE INSERT ********

[Whereupon, at 1:35 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]