



**Hearing on  
“Preserving Americans’ Access to AM Radio”**

**United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Energy and Commerce**

***Subcommittee on Innovation, Data, and Commerce***

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**Statement of Melody Spann Cooper  
Chairwoman and CEO  
Midway Broadcasting Corporation**

**National Association of Broadcasters**

Good morning, Chairs Rodgers and Bilirakis, Ranking Members Pallone and Schakowsky, and distinguished members of the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Innovation, Data, and Commerce. My name is Melody Spann Cooper, and I have the honor of serving as the Chairwoman and CEO of the Midway Broadcasting Corporation, Chicago's only Black and female-owned broadcasting company. Today, I proudly testify on behalf of the National Association of Broadcasters and the thousands of free, local, over-the-air AM radio stations that serve your constituents across the United States.

Every month, over 82 million Americans tune into AM radio for news, entertainment, sports and emergency information. Over 15,000 radio stations operate in the United States, providing content to Americans for free on a daily basis. Of those, nearly 4,500 are AM radio stations. Midway Broadcasting Corporation operates two of these stations. First, WVON 1690AM-the Talk of Chicago, the oldest Black-oriented radio station in Chicago and which is an urban talk format. Second, WRLI 1450AM-La Voz De La Comunidad Latina, Chicago's home for Latino independent broadcasters and which represents the authentic voice and culture of Chicago's growing Latino community.

Let me tell you a little bit about our journey into AM radio. Our story began in 1963, with the debut of radio station WVON-the Voice of the Negro. Its owners were Leonard and Phil Chess, the founders of Chess Records. Leonard and Phil were two Polish immigrants who wanted to create an outlet for the Black community to have a voice in media during the Great Migration. In fact, they were the first to launch a radio station in Chicago specifically designed to serve the city's growing Black community. WVON created a legendary group of radio personalities known as "The Good Guys," who made WVON one of the top three stations in Chicago. The station became known nationwide as a powerhouse for cultural relevance and political activism.

More than 40 years ago, Midway Broadcasting Corporation was founded by two WVON legendary radio personalities, Wesley South and Pervis Spann. Wesley and

Pervis eventually acquired WVON and joined an exclusive group of minority broadcaster owners in the country. Wesley South attended Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism after serving in World War II. He would go on to work for the Chicago Defender and Johnson Publishing Company. At WVON Radio, he would have the opportunity to interview Presidents John F. Kennedy and Jimmy Carter, jazz legend Duke Ellington, sports pioneer Jackie Robinson and even Martin Luther King Jr., to name a few.

Pervis Spann attended the Midwestern Broadcasting School under the G.I. Bill, before starting work at WOPA radio in 1959. In 1960, he organized his first concert, featuring B.B. King and Junior Parker. A few years later, when he started working at WVON under the leadership of Leonard and Phil Chess, he gained a regular late-night blues slot and even organized and won an 87-hour "sleepless sit-in" at the radio station to raise money for Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders and organizations. In 1967, it was my dad, Pervis Spann, who crowned Aretha Franklin as "the Queen of Soul." Over several decades, he continued to promote and amplify the careers of leading blues and soul performers including his hometown friend from Itta, Mississippi, B.B. King, the Jackson 5 and Chaka Khan. Wesley South and Pervis Spann would create a generational powerhouse of broadcast leadership, as I, the proud daughter of Pervis Spann, would be so fortunate to assume the reins of Midway Broadcasting Corporation.

Under my father's mentorship, I began working at WVON at age fifteen. My dad made me a weekend personality to distract me from the mean streets of big Chicago, and I've never left. I have worked as the station's news director, program director, and in 1994, took on the roles of president and general manager. In 1999, I became chairman of the board.

Under my leadership, Midway Broadcasting Corporation has expanded its footprint beyond WVON to also include WRLL Radio and VON-TV, a digital streaming offering. Additionally, I have been honored to represent Midway in several capacities

including serving as a board member for the National Association of Black-Owned Broadcasters and a member on the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Communications Equity and Diversity Council. A couple of years ago, I was honored to make history as the chair of the Illinois Broadcasters Association (IBA) and was recognized with the "IBA's Vincent T. Wasilewski Broadcaster of the Year" award.

Just last month, WVON Radio celebrated its 61<sup>st</sup> anniversary of being a local, live and trusted source for news, entertainment and education in the Chicago market. We have never strayed from our mission to provide niche programming and content that empowers and educates Chicago's thriving Black and Latino communities. We have stayed true to the reason the FCC granted our license, which is to serve and educate the public.

Our AM stations are necessary in Chicago for many reasons, not the least of which is our social impact. Here are a few examples of the unique educational service WVON and WRLI have provided to our communities.

Twelve years ago, a local attorney asked if he could invest in a weekly half-hour show to educate the public on the importance of estate planning. Not only was this an invaluable resource to our audience, but today, Attorney Ted London has the largest estate planning law firm in Illinois. This year, he joined forces with Attorney Valerie Acosta and is offering the same services on our Spanish station, WRLI.

Another great example is a partnership with our Cook County Treasurer, Maria Pappas. Treasurer Pappas hosts a weekly segment that offers refunds to Cook County homeowners who have overpaid their property taxes. As a result of our program, the treasurer has returned over \$300 million to Cook County taxpayers.

Finally, we recently assisted the Honorable Robin Kelly (IL-02), a member of your distinguished committee, with her legislation aimed at reducing maternal mortality, by hosting her on air to spread awareness. This type of deep-dive programming, that

matches the unique needs of our community and connects our audience to our leaders, is unmatched.

These are just a few examples of the work we are doing in Chicago, but these stories could be told again and again all over the country by AM outlets who are connected to their respective constituencies.

AM Radio is important to communities across the country not only because it is a cultural, news and sports oasis that educates the public, but also because it is a resilient lifeline during public safety emergencies. To put it as simply as I can, the foremost reason that Congress should care about AM radio is that it is a lifesaver. No other communications medium has the reach or resiliency of AM radio. A single station can be heard as far as 700 miles away. The signal cuts through buildings and mountains. In remote areas where no cell signal or FM station can be found, AM is there. When the power goes out, radio stations can still be found on battery or crank radios, or in your car.

Radio and TV broadcasters and others have worked with the Department of Homeland Security, in a private-public partnership, to create the Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS). This national system provides locally targeted and authenticated emergency and life-saving information to the public. Broadcasters disperse these alerts through the Emergency Alert System, EAS. The IPAWS system warns the public when there is an impending natural or human-made disaster, threat, or dangerous or missing person. Broadcasters are pleased to work alongside other communications media, including wireless and wireline phone providers, cable and satellite TV and radio providers, and others to deliver these critical alerts.

However, we have seen in recent times how delicate our communications infrastructure can be. In February, tens of thousands of mobile users lost service for hours due to what seems to have been human error. We can only imagine the horrors that could follow if such an event resulted from a cyber or security attack. And we know

how desperate Americans can feel for information when natural disasters knock out many means of communication. When the power goes out and cell towers go down, Americans can depend on radio to provide them the emergency information they need.

While wireless providers deliver Wireless Emergency Alerts voluntarily, broadcasters and others who distribute warnings through the Emergency Alert System are required by law to provide the President with capability to address the American people within ten minutes during a national emergency. This mandate for broadcasters also necessitates investment in equipment and updates, skills and readiness training for staff, and regular testing and monitoring of the system by public safety officials and broadcast station engineers.

Chicago is located in the center of the country and once seemed tornado-resistant. But as the country's weather patterns have shifted, tornadoes have touched down in surrounding collar counties. Our stations are able to deliver up-to-the-minute safety information because we are live and local. Moreover, Chicago winters can be brutal. City and county officials rely on us to provide important information on warming and relief centers for those who need it. This information saves lives.

Additionally, 77 radio stations – a vast majority of those being AM – across the country participate in the National Public Warning System (NPWS). These stations, known as Primary Entry Point (PEP) stations, work with FEMA to provide information to the public before, during, and after emergency incidents. PEP stations are equipped with back-up communications equipment and power generators designed to enable them to continue broadcasting information to the public during and after such an event. The NPWS can directly reach more than 90% of the U.S. population and ensures that under all conditions the President can alert and warn the public. To put a finer point on it – these are the stations that are still on the air when literally everything else goes down.

As of this writing, 247 bipartisan Members of the House – nearly equally divided between Republicans and Democrats – have cosponsored a bill to require auto

manufacturers to provide AM radio in vehicles manufactured or sold in the United States. In the Senate, 48 bipartisan Senators have signed onto this legislation. Current and former FEMA, DOT, and FCC officials have spoken strongly in favor of maintaining AM radio in vehicles as a safety feature. Supporters across the country include over 70 organizations representing public safety officials, first responders, local governments, rural and agricultural communities, older Americans, minority and underserved communities, conservative and religious voices, and broadcasters across the spectrum. When Senators Ed Markey (MA) and Ted Cruz (TX), the American Farm Bureau and the National Urban League, and the National Religious Broadcasters and the National Association of Black-Owned Broadcasters (NABOB) all unite behind an issue, it demonstrates the compelling case for this legislation. Here are a few examples of their support, in their own words:

NABOB was recently quoted as saying the following about AM radio: “[Removing AM radio from cars and trucks] represents a huge setback for AM radio stations serving the needs of the African American community, as AM radio is a crucial medium for delivering content that is culturally relevant and often missing from other formats. More broadly, the removal of AM radio from electric vehicles would be a step backward in broadcasters’ efforts to promote diversity and inclusivity in media. It would reinforce the dominance of mainstream media outlets and limit the diversity of voices and perspectives that are heard.”

Additionally, Latino Media Network provided the following quote when asked about AM radio: “Radio, and specifically AM radio, is a critical lifeline of information to Latino and Spanish language communities. For Latinos, AM radio serves as a pivotal point of connection to cultural, in-language, religious or spiritual, and sports content. For Latinos with connections to their home countries, listening to AM radio sports programming in-language helps them navigate their arrival and to sustain a cultural connection to their home country, especially when their favorite soccer star or baseball player scores big for their home team. For Latinos living in rural areas without reliable access to broadband or consistent wireless connections, the free over-the-air content

delivered by AM radio also helps them maintain a pulse on what is happening in their communities.”

In conclusion, Americans need fact-based, reliable information before, during, and after emergency events. Time and time again, AM radio is that critical lifeline. The federal government has a long history of advancing public safety in the automobile, from seatbelts to airbags to back-up cameras. Congress should do the same here, ensuring Americans’ continued access to emergency information through their car radios as a safety feature. I commend this committee for advancing this important legislation and your local broadcasters are proud to support these efforts through enactment.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.