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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Ensuring Effective and Reliable Alerts and Warnings

Emergency Preparedness, Response & Communications Subcommittee

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When Hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast in 2005, we saw firsthand how the lack of a modern national emergency alert capability complicated the immediate response and recovery in the gulf states.

Within a year of the storm, President Bush directed FEMA to accelerate the integration of modernize the aging Emergency Alerts System and leverage new technologies into its alerts and warnings platform, the Integrated Public Alerts and Warnings System (IPAWS).

In the years since, IPAWS has evolved, pushing out alerts and warnings via televisions, radios, and cell phones. IPAWS is exploring opportunities to integrate new technologies, including networked devices.

The program has increased the number of approved alert originators to ensure that State and local governments have the ability to properly issue warnings in their areas.

Toward that end: Emergency alerts and warnings save lives, but only if the public responds to them.

That means the alerts must be accessible to those with access and functional needs, available to those in urban and rural areas alike, and accurate so the public will heed the instruction.

In the past, I have raised concerns about whether alerts and warnings are accessible to people with hearing or vision impairments, as well as those who do not speak English.

I understand that lessons learned from previous tests of the Emergency Alert System have informed updates to the alerting system to make messages clearer for those with limited vision.

I also understand that the IPAWS platform is currently capable of pushing out alerts and warnings in Spanish, and I am interested in learning whether that capability is

being utilized and what efforts FEMA is undertaking to broaden the accessibility for those who cannot read or speak English or Spanish.

Moreover, to ensure that emergency alerts and warnings are available to those who live beyond the reach of a cell tower, FEMA must continue to pursue novel approaches to alerts and warnings to reach those who are not watching TV or listening to the radio.

Finally, alerts and warnings must be accurate.

Last month's disturbing false alert about an incoming missile in Hawaii revealed gaps related to training, policy, and procedure for issuing alerts and warnings.

I am not raising this issue to chase a headline or to shame the Federal or State agencies involved.

Rather, I raise this issue because I am concerned that false alerts like the one issued last month could result in the public taking alerts and warnings less seriously, delaying response, or ignoring them all together.

Every minute matters during a disaster, and we cannot afford to have the public wasting time questioning whether an alert is real before taking action.

I look forward to learning how FEMA is updating its training, policies, and best practices to prevent additional false alerts in the future.

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