

Statement of Ranking Member Donald M. Payne, Jr.

Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications Hearing

Ensuring Effective and Reliable Alerts and Warnings

February 6, 2018

Our ability to issue timely emergency alerts and warnings is an essential component of national preparedness. We know when the public is warned early, and given enough time to protect themselves and their property, we can limit the human toll and mitigate damage to our communities.

Since the Federal government began pursuing a national alerting capability over 50 years ago, we have leveraged advances in technology to push alerts out to a larger population of the public more quickly. At the same time, the Federal government has undertaken efforts to educate the public about alerts and warnings, and how important it is to respond to them.

Ultimately, for public alerts and warnings to be effective, the public has to trust them. This is why last month's false ballistic missile alert in Hawaii was so troubling. I am concerned that a single employee was able to issue the alert in the first place, and that it took nearly forty minutes to issue a "false alarm" message over the platform.

That said, false alerts are not limited to Hawaii. During a routine test of the emergency alert system last month, a false alert announcing an "emergency" in Morris County, New Jersey, interrupted programming for certain cable subscribers last month. After Hurricane Irma hit Florida last year, an alert issued in error by a state employee directed residents to boil their water, causing hours of confusion.

What these incidents have taught us is that we need enhanced training and guidance for the state and local governments that are authorized to issue emergency alerts through FEMA's Integrated Public Alert Warning System or "IPAWS". False alerting can be very dangerous, as it can lead to alert apathy, confusion, or unnecessary panic.

Nevertheless, we should not allow these incident to cloud the success of otherwise trustworthy emergency alert and warning system.

Wireless Emergency Alerts have been particularly effective in keeping people out of harm's way, whether used to warn of inclement weather or a manmade attack. To date, 33,000 Wireless Emergency Alerts messages have been disseminated. The majority of these messages have been weather-related, and were instrumental in saving lives during last year's unusually active hurricane season and unprecedented wildfires.

But it is important to note that Wireless Emergency Alerts were also sent after the Boston Marathon bombing and the Chelsea bombing in New York to help law enforcement catch terror suspects.

As we evaluate the existing alerts and warnings system, I will be interested to learn what efforts are underway at the Federal, state, and local level to integrate emerging technologies into alerts and warnings procedures.

I look forward to engaging both panels about what has been working well with IPAWS, and to gauge what needs improvement.