Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Dan Donovan (R-NY)
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications

"Assessing First Responder Communications"

October 12, 2017

Remarks as Prepared

I want to welcome our witnesses here this morning on an issue that is vital to our homeland security: the ability of our first responders to communicate.

As noted in the 2006 National Interoperability Baseline Survey, there is a "direct correlation…between effective communications interoperability and first responders' ability to save lives."

In my home town of New York City, we know this all too well. Both the Office of Emergency Communications and First Responder Network Authority were established in the wake of the communications failures on 9/11, and later, in Hurricane Katrina.

We have made a great deal of progress since those fateful disasters. States and localities have invested billions of dollars in their communications networks, including governance, training, and equipment.

The Office of Emergency Communications has completed two National Emergency Communications Plans and has provided guidance and technical assistance to state and local stakeholders.

And this year we've reached another milestone. FirstNet, in its fifth year since its establishment in the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act, awarded a contract to AT&T to build out the nationwide public safety broadband network. And to date, nearly half of states and territories have committed to opt-in to that network.

We know this work is making a difference. In contrast to 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, first responder networks, for the most part, remained operable during the response to Superstorm Sandy, even while commercial networks experienced outages. It is my understanding that first responder networks were largely able to withstand the impacts of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. I am interested in hearing our witnesses' assessments of how these networks fared during the recent hurricanes.

But, despite these advancements, challenges remain. Earlier this year, this Subcommittee joined with the Subcommittee on Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Protection to hold a roundtable on cyber risks to emergency communications networks.

We've seen the evolution of communications technology, providing enhanced capabilities for first responders. But, with those benefits come the risk of cybersecurity vulnerabilities, as many of these systems and applications are IP based and interconnected.

We must ensure our Nation's first responders are aware of cybersecurity threats and can work to address them.

And, as we prepare for first responders to have access to the nationwide public safety broadband network, we cannot forget that first responders will continue to depend on land-mobile radio for mission critical voice communications.

I am concerned about a requirement that first responder radio networks operating on the T-Band must migrate off that spectrum by 2021. This will have significant impact on a number of major metropolitan areas, including New York City, and studies have suggested that there isn't sufficient alternative spectrum for these jurisdictions to use.

In taking steps forward with the public safety broadband network, we must ensure we're not taking steps back for mission critical voice networks on which our first responders rely.

I'm looking forward to our witnesses' assessment of the current state of first responder communications and what more needs to be done to ensure first responders have the connectivity and information to continue to serve our communities.

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