Opening Statement of Rep. Bart Gordon
Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Internet
Committee on Energy and Commerce
September 29, 2005

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing.

We saw an unprecedented collapse of communications on all levels in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

I am particularly concerned about the collapse of the 9-1-1 system. According to the FCC, thirty-eight 9-1-1 centers went down leaving citizens with no way to call for help and severely hampering rescue and relief efforts. Because the legacy 9-1-1 system is not interoperable, once a local 9-1-1 center fails there is no back up.

The 9-1-1 system is a critical component of the nation's emergency communications system. The 9-1-1 call is the first cry for help and the first alarm. It is tells first responders where to go and what to expect when they get there. When we lost the 911 system in the Gulf Coast Area, we lost that link between citizen and first responder.

The 9-1-1 call center is frequently also functions as dispatch for fire, police, EMS or all three in many areas.

It would be a mistake to talk about interoperability issues for first responders without also considering 9-1-1 call centers. They are an integral part of local emergency communication systems.

Along with Rep. Eshoo and Shimkus, I introduced a bill several months ago that works towards an IP-based emergency response system that would allow another 911 center to take calls if one call center fails. An IP-based system would also empower 911 centers to share information and coordinate responses in the event of regional disasters. This bill also ensures that millions of people who use VOIP phone service have full E-9-1-1 services.

I understand that this hearing will focus on interoperability issues for first responders. However, I hope that the committee will address the nation's 9-1-1 system at a later hearing.

Questions

For Chairman Martin:

In your testimony before the Senate last week, you stressed the importance of ensuring that our PSAPs are redundant and the need for the federal government to take the lead facilitating coordination among state and local governments to ensure the resilience and reliability of the 9-1-1 system.

Following up on your comments, in your opinion should efforts be focused on building redundancy into the current 9-1-1 system, for example, by ensuring that all PSAPs have access to multiple Selective Routers? If so, how do you propose that such a system be funded? Or, should we be placing more emphasis on the migration from today's 9-1-1 system to a more robust IP-based emergency services network that is by its nature redundant system?

For FEMA:

I understand from reports from the national 9-1-1 community that many 9-1-1 call centers, like police and fire departments, were equally in need of assistance in the areas affected by hurricane Katrina. Specifically, the PSAPs that were operational in the New Orleans area had dispatchers working around the clock with virtually no breaks. Neighboring states had dispatchers that were prepared to deploy to New Orleans but were delayed getting FEMA approval because PSAPs were not officially recognized by FEMA as eligible entities.

It seems that too often 9-1-1 centers are forgotten as first responders because they don't physically respond, but they have to be in place for the public to be able to get their request for help to the responders. Are you making efforts to ensure that PSAPs are included in your processes and are on equal footing with traditional first responder agencies?

DHS Dr. Boyd

In your testimony you listed a number of activities for OIC to strengthen and integrate interoperability and compatibility efforts. Where do you stand on the implementation of these activities and please provide specific examples.

SafeCom has articulated a vision for interoperability scheduled for completion not later than 2023. Could you provide me with a timeline and cost projections for implementations of your schedule

Dr. Boyd you mentioned that SafeCom has provided interoperability guidance for the state homeland security grant program, the urban area security initiative grant program and the law enforcement terrorism grant program. Are the grant-making authorities utilizing SafeCom guidance?

Dr. Boyd, what is the completion date for the national interoperability baseline study? Please provide a timeline.

Dr. Boyd, SLGCP funds ICTAP. How much funding is provided for this program and how many jurisdictions have you assisted?