

9/11

Public Discourse Project

Prepared Statement of Timothy J. Roemer
before the Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet
Committee on Energy and Commerce
U.S. House of Representatives
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Chairman Upton, Ranking Member Markey, Members of the Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet:

- It is an honor to appear before this distinguished panel today to discuss an issue of great importance to the security of our nation.
- As we learned on 9/11, the new threats we face are not confined to distant battlefields—they can materialize here, on the streets of America.
- Now we are all on the front lines. If terrorists strike again on American soil, it will be local emergency responders—police, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians—who will answer the call.
- I would like to talk about our investigation into events of 9/11, as described by the 9/11 Commission in its report. Those events dramatically illustrate the need for the reform we're here today to discuss.

POOR COMMUNICATIONS – FIRST RESPONDERS AT THE WTC

- The response at the World Trade Center on September 11 was the largest single emergency response in our nation's history. Hundreds of firefighters, NYPD, and Port Authority Police converged on Lower Manhattan to participate in the rescue.
- What we learned in our investigation is that our first responders did not have the communications they needed or deserved.

- Firefighters had a particularly difficult time communicating with one another and with their commanders.
 - As an FDNY chief in the North Tower told us: “One of the most critical things in a major operation like this is to have information. Unfortunately, we didn’t have a lot of information coming in.”
 - The fire chiefs in the North Tower lobby didn’t have any reports of what the NYPD helicopters overhead had seen.
 - They didn’t know the extent of the damage to the building over their heads.
 - They didn’t know the condition of the stairwells.
 - They couldn’t get updated information from FDNY dispatch, where dozens of calls were pouring in from civilians on the floors above them. That information would have been extremely valuable to them.
 - Another chief in the North Tower lobby that day told us that people watching on TV had better information than he did.
 - Without real-time information, the chiefs were at a huge disadvantage. They were like generals on a battlefield without reconnaissance, intelligence, or even a current map.
 - Without real-time information, many fire department units were told simply to head up the stairs and report back via radio.
- As the units in the both towers climbed higher, their radio transmissions were disrupted by the many floors between them and their commanders. Communications with the chiefs in the lobby became weaker and more sporadic.
- Furthermore, the main radio channel for FDNY communications was not designed to handle the number of firefighters at the towers.

- So many people were trying to speak at once, the transmissions overlapped and often became indecipherable.
 - Because that channel was so overwhelmed, it was impossible for the chiefs to track the location of the many FDNY units in the towers.
- At 9:59 that morning, the South Tower collapsed. A general evacuation order was issued for firefighters in the North Tower.
 - Some did not receive the evacuation order over their radios, but were alerted in person by other units.
 - Some did not receive the order at all.
 - Some received the order, but did not evacuate with great urgency:
 - Many disregarded the order to stay and search for civilians.
 - Some waited for members of their teams to regroup before they headed down the stairs
 - Some were tired, so they rested in stairwells before continuing down.
 - Many firefighters in the North Tower didn't even know that the South Tower had collapsed. Even chiefs in the North Tower lobby didn't learn of the collapse of the South Tower for 30 minutes.
 - Several firefighters who survived told us that they, and others who did not survive, would have evacuated more urgently if they had known of the South Tower's collapse.
- NYPD communications were generally better, because most NYPD officers were not climbing the Towers, but were outside evacuating civilians and controlling crowds.

- Meanwhile, most Port Authority Police had no way to hear any commands issued over the World Trade Center command frequency.

POOR COMMUNICATIONS BETWEEN AGENCIES

- As we learned in our investigation, the quality of communications varied from agency to agency. But radio communications and operational coordination between agencies was uniformly a problem, at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.
- For example:
 - Fire chiefs in the lobbies of the towers got no information from the police helicopters circling above. Reports that called into question the condition of the North Tower, at 10:08, 10:15, and 10:221 a.m., would have been extremely valuable information for the FDNY chiefs in the North Lobby.
 - Many redundant searches were conducted that morning. For example, firefighters wasted valuable time searching the PATH transit station under the Trade Center, not knowing that the area had already been cleared by Port Authority officers.
 - Even at the Pentagon, where the emergency response effort was a comparative success, the Arlington Country After-Action Report concluded that “almost all aspects of communications [were] problematic.” The report also notes that “radio channels were initially oversaturated.”

WHAT WE RECOMMENDED

- The courage and determination of the first responders saved thousands of lives that morning.
- They risked their lives, and many gave their lives, to rescue people they had never met.
- They performed far beyond what we would ever have any right to expect. Had they received timely information that morning, many of those brave firefighters and police officers could have saved more lives, and their

own lives.

- As we said in our report, “The first responders of today live in a world transformed by the attacks on 9/11. Because no one believes that every conceivable form of attack can be prevented, civilians and first responders will again find themselves on the front lines.”
- To help those on the front lines, the 9/11 Commission made a common-sense recommendation: Congress should reallocate broadcast spectrum for public safety purposes.

CONCLUSION

- Hurricane Katrina reminds us that this problem has not been solved. Poor communications delayed emergency response. Poor communications again cost lives.
 - New Orleans and three neighboring parishes were using different equipment and different frequencies—they couldn’t talk to each another.
 - Helicopter crews couldn’t talk to rescuers in boats.
 - National Guard commanders in Mississippi had to use human couriers to carry messages.
- After Katrina, communications for first responders must become an urgent priority for this Congress. We should not have to learn these lessons a third time.
- The transition to Digital TV offers us the perfect opportunity to fulfill this recommendation. The analog TV spectrum is ideal for public safety use. Emergency communications on these frequencies can easily penetrate walls, and travel great distances.
- Broadcasters have dropped their opposition to a hard deadline for returning the analog TV spectrum. This is a step forward.
- Now the ball is in your court. Congress should set the earliest possible date for the transfer of 700 MHz spectrum to America’s first responders. We cannot afford another four year delay—we will surely be hit again,

and if we have not fixed communications problems lives will be lost.

- We need a date certain for the turnover of the spectrum, so that all involved can prepare:
 - Manufacturers can produce new public safety communications technologies to take advantage of the new spectrum, and
 - Public safety agencies can acquire these capabilities
- We know that there are other contentious issues involved with the Digital TV transition. They should not stop a bill to reallocate the spectrum for public safety purposes. Our first responders must come first.
- Chairman Upton and Ranking Member Markey, Chairman Barton and Ranking Member Dingell of the full Committee, Representative Pickering, Representative Wynn, and numerous other members of the Committee on Energy and Commerce should be commended for their leadership on this important national security issue.
- Other members of the House and Senate have also been strongly supportive of this reform. We thank them for their efforts.
- We look forward to working with you, and with your counterparts in the Senate, to enact this common-sense 9/11 Commission recommendation into law this year—for the safety of our first responders, and the communities they protect. Thank you, and I would be pleased to respond to your questions.

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