Remarks of
FCC Chairman Michael K. Powell
At the
National Emergency Numbering Association (NENA)
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I am thrilled to be here. I know you have had a busy and engaging morning, so I'm really grateful that you offered me this opportunity to talk to you about what's on my mind and how we will continue to have this partnership blossom.

We need to continue to explore the changes that are going to take place in the communications marketplace and how we can position public safety and first responders not only to meet the challenges but also to profit from them. We will not just have challenges. Real opportunity also comes from being able to see what more we can do. That's why I think that it's important to mention some of the new networks.

When I give policy speeches, my favorite subject these days is the digital migration. What we are talking about in every facet of the communications revolution is truly the most significant paradigm shift in the history of the communications industry. It's one, which is going to migrate the entire nation's global analog infrastructure and architecture to one that is digital capable, capable of IP, and other data communication services. It's one that is going to spin more and more products and devices and services out from the center of the network into the hand, laptops, and palm pilots of our consumers.

Our children's generation is going to experience communications in a way we never could have imagined. This already is well underway in the United States and around the globe. It will present new challenges, but it's also going to present really important opportunities. Just consider that when I became Chairman a little more than three and a half years ago, twelve million American households subscribed to broadband. Today, that number is somewhere around fifty million. And if you think that it's really accelerating, ten million of those have been added just since November. So the pace is really beginning to pick up. In 2004, you're going to see dramatic increases in broadband architecture, home networking, and all kinds of services that are going to connect our citizens through a lot of devices and services that are going to be unfamiliar to us and a challenge for public policy and public safety.

There is great public safety promise in the new network. We need to assure that the basic location capabilities of E911 are robust and with us as we migrate to new technology. But if that's as far as we go, shame on us. That's because there are growth and innovative platforms that will allow us to consider first-responder assistance like none we've ever seen before.

We should be thinking about this as much as an opportunity as a threat. Just consider the nature of these networks and how many problems they can potentially solve that have always plagued E911 and public safety. For example, open architecture and software-based application systems inherently mean networks that are cheaper to evolve and upgrade. During the seven years I have been at the Commission, I have watched the struggle of state and local governments stewarding

proprietary systems built by one manufacturer and struggling to constantly upgrade and evolve those systems for the analog world. But I have also seen what the scale and scope of open architecture, software-based infrastructures are doing. I've seen PSAPs that are able to use off-the-shelf equipment to help lower their costs and improve their assistance.

As we transition to this digital architecture, I think one of the great benefits is going to be a cheaper and easier migration path into the future. That's something that we've always prayed for in public safety—to get those equipment costs down. But the key advantage to getting this right is starting early and starting together. This technology is exciting, and it may be littering the pages of your newspaper, but it is fundamentally in its infancy. We have a historic opportunity to work on public safety and E911 from the ground floor up, rather than what we seem to always be struggling with which is retrofitting systems that are already in existence or have matured to a great degree. I think this is what gives me so much optimism—not only insuring what we have but also promoting greater flexibility and new functionality.

We have seen the immense difficulty of trying to retrofit the existing system. All you have to do is start cataloging our difficult experiences, though going well, with E911 retrofit on the wireless system. You had to go back and engineer solutions for analog, closed networks that lack general standards that were probably proprietary architecture. Dale Hatfield, in his seminal report that continues to be a guide for the rest of us, noted these things as the significant challenges of trying to efficiently deploy E911 on the wireless system.

I don't need to lecture you about them. You're familiar with them: developing and paying for upgrades necessary to handle ALI and ANI information in many different formats from wireless carriers; the struggle of providing trunking from the PSTN to the PSAP; the need to create systems capable of delivering location information with the requisite accuracy we want; and the handset manufacturing which had to take place for GPS and new handsets.

These are all very significant undertakings made difficult by the fact that they're coming in late on the development of the service. We're attempting to do all of that as wireless subscribership continues to grow exponentially. You know I have been to a lot of PSAP's and a lot of them tell me that well over fifty percent of the calls coming into the centers these days are coming from wireless handsets. We currently have a hundred and fifty million subscribers of wireless services in the United States, and we are lagging, racing to catch up with those citizens that we are sworn to protect and serve with an E911 system that wasn't engineered from the beginning.

With broadband networks, particularly using VoIP applications, we do have that rare opportunity to join hands and develop the solutions early before our citizens and our consumers begin to use these services in overwhelming numbers. That's what we should be focused on.

I have one really brief message: the commitment of the FCC remains deep and unwavering. We've shown that commitment and we try to show it repeatedly in our commitment to E911. Working with NENA we developed a valuable coordination initiative at your suggestion. I brought the critical stakeholders together to solve E911 deployment problems. Our next initiative will be in April, on the 27th and 28th. I commend the efforts of the association and the "Swat Team" that's done so much to help local communities find the answers to their problems.

As you know, we commissioned the study by Dale Hatfield that's helped not only to identify problems that we didn't necessarily foresee, but also to really point out the path to avoid repeating the same mistakes twice. That's an exciting initiative. We have worked very aggressively with Congress at our last coordination initiative. We had senior members of Congress, Senator Clinton, Representative Shimkus, and other members participate with us and pledge their commitment to a legislative solution. I'll leave it to their staff and the panel before to talk about what the prospects are, but shame on them if they don't get this done.

We have stood in the bully pulpit repeatedly to challenge and rally stakeholders. But we understand that talk is not enough. We have not hesitated to use the full brunt of our enforcement power for any recalcitrant carrier that will not live up to their obligation. That was the case then, it's the case now, and will stay the case as we go forward.

More importantly, we look out across the FCC's constituencies, every arm of the Commission and every organization that might be able to contribute assistance to the importance on E911. We've looked at every organization, such as the Network Reliability and Interoperability Council (NRIC), which has been with us for years, and includes carrier representatives from wireline industry and the wireless industry. We have recently chartered a subcommittee of that association that will focus exclusively on technical issues associated with E911. NRIC's new charter will be headed by a wireless CEO for the first time in the history, and they will make recommendations. The Technical Advisory Committee of the FCC just this last January made a number of significant recommendations about protecting the long-term future of public safety communications.

We have also not been willing to sit still on E911 by stressing obligations of mobile satellite carriers, telematics services, and disposable phones. Any time we see a challenge and opportunity we're going to move expeditiously to tackle it.

Again, I can't say enough how much I have tried to make a personal investment in this objective. I'm an old solider and I'm a person who knows what it means to serve and protect. I have been at the Commission for seven years and have worked with the government through Y2K conversions, through E911, through hurricanes, through the most tragic event in the history of our American homeland in which we really saw the vulnerability and the importance of having rapid and efficient first responder systems. Our commitment is personal.

We've been out on the road visiting PSAPs and lending our support where we can. Just last week on a two-day visit to Kansas I made a point to visit a public safety answering point utilizing the latest E911 phase II technology, finding out what's working and what's not and helping them talk to the press, their local public officials—even their Governor—about the importance of continuing to put resources and efforts behind those efforts. And we're going to keep doing that. We will keep doing that.

So I hope in your eyes we have some credibility from what we've done, but it's important for you to challenge me. As we move to "voice over the Internet" and as we move to broadband, I want to say we're going to bring the same feel and commitment to deal with public safety in

those issues. We support minimal economic regulation for emerging services but we are unwavering and resolute that, as we move forward, we advance the interests of public safety in the new systems.

We have set in motion a collaborative effort to develop a strong solution for IP-based services. Our first Solution Summit, as we are calling it, is dedicated to public safety. It will be the first of the series of summits that will kick off on March 18. I encourage you to participate in that effort, watch that effort, and work with us as we develop those solutions and bring the stakeholders together to find workable solutions.

Recently we adopted a Notice of Proposal Rulemaking on IP-based services which asked very direct and pointed questions about public safety in order to make sure that we develop a full and complete record that can serve as a launching point if necessary to move to more substantial protections for public safety.

In conclusion, let me tell you that I am proud to be a partner of this association. You do the hard work and you help shine the light on the problems we just addressed. We're just thrilled we get to come in and stand next to you to find the solutions. I think the future is extremely bright because there's going to be a day when our children are our age and they will have the ability to roam the nation and the planet safe and secure in the knowledge that they can quickly reach services should they find themselves in distress. That should be our goal for our citizens. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this important forum.

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