Testimony of
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United States House Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Communications & Technology

Public Safety Communications in the United States

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SUMMARY

As set forth in the following testimony, I support:

- Establishing Recovery Time Objectives for full FirstNet cell sites, not just delivery and activation of deployable cell sites.
- Requiring additional hardening and resilience measures to be implemented at cell sites supporting the FirstNet National Public Safety Broadband Network, including redundant transport pathways (satellite, microwave, disparate fiber paths, etc.) and increased run time requirements for backup power systems.
- Passage of the AM for Every Vehicle Act of 2025 (H.R. 979 / S. 315) to require access to AM broadcast stations in all new motor vehicles.

Thank you Chairman Hudson, Ranking Member Matsui, and distinguished members of the Sub-Committee. My name is Steve Newton, I am the Emergency Management Director for Chatham County, North Carolina. I also serve as the Vice Chair of the North Carolina Statewide Interoperability Executive Committee. I welcome the opportunity to discuss public safety communications.

The ability for public safety leaders and responders to communicate is never more essential than the days immediately before and after a disaster. We depend on communications pathways from Government-to-Government, Government-to-Public, and Public-to-Public. When any of these pathways fail, there are consequences. In many cases, the ability to communicate may help us prevent a disaster from becoming a catastrophe. Widespread and sustained inoperability of cellular networks, land mobile radio systems, and 911 call routing create an exceptionally difficult operating environment in which incident commanders and responders aren't aware of changing conditions, can't adequately plan and request resources, can't effectively direct response activities, alert the public, or protect its front-line personnel.

Over the last 32 years, I have participated in the response to twenty-one federally declared disasters, in North Carolina, Louisiana, South Carolina, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii. Most recently I responded to Hurricane Helene in western North Carolina, and directed the response to Hurricane Chantal in my own jurisdiction. Of those disasters, three stand out for their impact to public safety communications.

In 2005 I deployed to Saint Tammany Parish, Louisiana, after Hurricane Katrina. Wind, torrential rain, flooding, and storm surge resulted in loss of life, damage to homes, damage to public safety answering points (9-1-1 Centers), emergency response facilities (police/fire/EMS stations/hospitals), public works yards, communications towers, wired and cellular telephone

facilities, power distribution, and other infrastructure. A telephone tandem located in New Orleans flooded, resulting in many 911 calls failing to be connected for more than a week in the region. After the second week calls were routed to PSAPs and temporary call centers over 10-digit administrative numbers, but without location information. Two 911 Centers in Louisiana were offline for more than 30 days. Requests for life saving resources had to be driven 68 miles away to the Louisiana State Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in Baton Rouge.

In 2017 I responded to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico after Hurricane María. The day after landfall on September 20, 95.2% of their cell sites were out of service. Three weeks after landfall, 81.1% of cell sites were still inoperable. Due to limited communications, our team spent three entire days on the road trying to locate community leaders who could brief us on current conditions and immediate needs. After we identified the needs, it took 9 days for our first resource request to arrive. It took 11 months to restore 100% power across the island, the longest blackout in United States history.

In 2024 I responded to western North Carolina after Hurricane Helene. Wind, torrential rain, landslides, and flooding resulted in loss of life, damage to homes, and damaged emergency response facilities, power distribution, utility and infrastructure. Over 1,700 miles of fiber optic cable was destroyed. Nineteen PSAPs were offline. 74% of cell sites were out of service across the region. Most of these cellular outages were a result of damage to fiber optic transport lines or extended power outages. This was across all cellular carriers, including FirstNet.

Hurricane Helene represents the most complex communications challenge encountered by public safety in North Carolina. Some of our successes include:

- North Carolina 911 Boards statewide Emergency Services IP network (ESInet). This allowed calls to the 19 offline PSAPs to be rerouted to non-impacted PSAPs. Chatham County received 9-1-1 calls for one impacted county for 30-days.
- North Carolina State Highway Patrol's Voice Interoperability Plan for Emergency Responders (VIPER) land mobile radio network processed nearly 3,000,000 radio calls.
- Private sector partners that coordinated repairs, deployable cell towers ("deployables"), and broadband internet.
- The cadre of communications professionals mobilized from across the State to restore essential equipment and links at PSAP's, EOC's, Shelters, and other emergency facilities.

Some of our challenges include:

- Widespread cell service interruption, across all carriers, occurring simultaneously due to landslides, flooding, or trees damaging primary fiber lines shared by multiple carriers.
- After 7 days, 22.2% of cell sites were offline overall, down from 74%. But within the harder hit jurisdictions like Yancey and Mitchell Counties, they still had 77% and 90% of their cell sites down, respectively. To my knowledge, these sites are not equipped with an alternative data transport circuits (i.e., satellite, microwave, disparate fiber paths, etc.).
- The use of temporary deployables to reestablish cell service to PSAPs, EOCs, hospitals, and other critical facilities was crucial. But it did not provide enough wide area coverage into the communities in where our responders were working.
- Communications tower sites, many of which are challenging to reach under normal conditions, became inaccessible after Helene. Refueling generators at communications tower sites becomes an immediate concern, especially when it's clear that utility power won't be restored for days or weeks.

The Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network (NPSBN), FirstNet, must be highly reliable, resilient, and secure, especially during a disaster. To that end, I recommend:

- Requiring additional hardening and resilience measures to be implemented at cell sites integrated into the FirstNet NPSBN, including redundant transport pathways (satellite, microwave, disparate fiber paths, etc.) and increased run time requirements for backup power systems.
- Establishing Recovery Time Objectives for FirstNet cell sites, in part or in full per county, and not just delivery and activation of deployables.

Thank you again Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Sub-Committee for allowing me to share my experiences and perspectives with you, and thank you all for your work to secure and advance public safety communications.