SHANNON D. DICUS, SHERIFF CORONER

# TESTIMONY OF
# SHERIFF SHANNON DICUS
# SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT

## COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
## SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

## UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
## SEPTEMBER 9, 2025

SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT
655 East Third Street • San Bernardino, California 92415-0061 Post Office Box 569 • San Bernardino, California 92402-0569

Chairman Hudson, Vice Chairman Allen, Ranking Member Matsui, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for holding this critical hearing, and thank you, Chairman Hudson, for your continued leadership on efforts to ensure Next Generation 9-1-1 capabilities reach every community.

I am Sheriff Shannon Dicus of San Bernardino County, California, testifying today on behalf of the Major County Sheriffs of America (MCSA) – a professional law enforcement association representing sheriffs' offices serving counties with populations of 400,000 or more and employing 700 or more personnel. Collectively, our member agencies protect over 110 million Americans – more than one-third of the U.S. population – across both densely populated urban centers and vast rural territories.

Sheriffs' offices cover entire counties, often including multiple cities, rural communities, and critical infrastructure. We respond to some of the nation's most complex and resource-intensive emergencies – from major event security and multi-jurisdictional investigations to disaster response across hundreds of square miles. We work closely with federal agencies, state police, local departments, fire services, and emergency management partners across jurisdictional boundaries.

We operate some of the largest 911 centers in the country, coordinate multi-agency responses, and maintain the communications infrastructure that many smaller agencies depend on during critical incidents. Federal partners rely on our local expertise and coordination capabilities. Multi-state investigations depend on our communications systems. When those systems fail, entire regions are impacted.

That's why MCSA has made emergency communications a top legislative priority. We have unmatched insight into where systems work – and where they fail. We know what's needed to keep Americans safe. We know that a robust and secure ecosystem of cellular networks, land mobile radio networks, and satellite networks is necessary to ensure our public safety personnel can give and receive critical life-saving information on every square foot of the territory we help to protect.

Today, I ask you to take actions to save American lives: Pass legislation to upgrade America to true Next Generation 9-1-1 capabilities and modernize emergency response networks with a focus on cybersecurity, resiliency, and real-time data capabilities; fund these essential upgrades; pass legislation to remove the sunset provision on the FirstNet Authority which has guided the deployment of the dedicated nationwide public safety broadband network that gives first responders priority communications; and establish federal cybersecurity standards for emergency systems. These investments will transform emergency response nationwide.

**Next Generation 911**

Citizens are already attempting to send text, video, and images to 911 during emergencies. Next Generation 9-1-1 ensures those inputs are not lost but transformed into actionable intelligence. With FirstNet integration, this intelligence is pushed directly to deputies, firefighters, and medics in route – turning raw data into real-time outcomes. This is how lives are saved in school shootings, floods, and wildfires

During school shootings, first responders often arrive blind to the threat because witnesses can't share visual information. In wildfire evacuations, agencies operate with outdated data because they cannot exchange live mapping. Emergency medical calls lack patient histories, real-time video, or exact location data – missing tools that could mean the difference between life and death.

These challenges are especially apparent in large and diverse jurisdictions that must cover vast territories with varied terrain and infrastructure limitations. As Sheriff of San Bernardino County – an area spanning 20,000 square miles and serving more than 2 million residents – I have witnessed firsthand how these communication gaps impact emergency response. Our operations range from dense urban environments to remote wilderness rescues separated by over 100 miles. We coordinate daily across municipal boundaries, state lines, and federal jurisdictions in deserts with limited cellular service, mountains where radio systems often fail, and congested urban areas where critical transmissions can be blocked.

Recognizing the growing demands on emergency communications, San Bernardino County took early and proactive steps to modernize our infrastructure. We were one of the first departments in California to implement text-to-911 capabilities, giving us firsthand insight into both the

potential and the complexities of Next Generation 9-1-1 deployment. Building on that foundation, we have implemented Next Generation 9-1-1 across our primary Public Safety Answering Points, integrating geo-diverse call routing, redundant systems, and enhanced interoperability. These upgrades have significantly improved coordination, resiliency, and our ability to respond to crises in real time.

However, even with a sophisticated system in place, challenges remain. Many smaller agencies in our region rely on our infrastructure to maintain basic emergency communications. Federal partners often depend on our coordination capabilities during large-scale incidents. When these systems go down, the impact is not isolated – it disrupts entire regions and puts lives at risk.

A key barrier to accelerating Next Generation 9-1-1 buildout is the current bureaucratic structure through which federal funds are distributed. Funds for Next Generation 9-1-1 are often routed through state agencies and Offices of Emergency Services, which, while well-intentioned, may not always reflect the local urgency or infrastructure readiness of counties like ours. We strongly urge Congress to explore flexible and direct-to-county funding options or streamlined administrative pathways to ensure local agencies can act swiftly to address the specific needs of their communities.

**Redundancy and Interoperability**

Next Generation 9-1-1 is not simply a technological upgrade; it is a life-saving necessity. The ability to transmit real-time video, images, and accurate location data during an emergency can make the difference between life and death. Yet despite its proven value and the availability of workable technology, Next Generation 9-1-1 deployment across the United States remains fragmented and underfunded. Many counties – particularly in rural or under-resourced areas – continue to rely on legacy systems built decades ago, which cannot meet the demands of today's emergencies.

In San Bernardino County, we maintain dual-carrier interoperability in our patrol vehicles, enabling deputies to use both AT&T and Verizon networks. Our Mobile Data Computers (MDCs) automatically switch between carriers based on signal strength. This redundancy ensures our deputies can access mission-critical data, no matter the geography or carrier limitations.

Traditional 800MHz land mobile radios also remain a core component of our communication ecosystem. In several areas of Southern California, including parts of our own jurisdiction, peace officers have no access to broadband data—only radio coverage. We maintain robust radio infrastructure and dispatch center interoperability boxes, which allow agencies like Caltrans, CHP, local fire, and law enforcement to seamlessly communicate during joint responses. Next Generation 9-1-1 must be additive to – not a replacement for – these essential tools.

**FirstNet and Infrastructure Security**

As a result of California's opt-in to FirstNet, San Bernardino County received five new FirstNet tower sites in areas where coverage was most urgently needed. Since then, Band 14 spectrum has been expanded into Apple Valley, Big Bear City, Chino Hills, Fontana, Highland, Montclair, San Bernardino, and Victorville. This reinvestment is not taxpayer-funded but comes from the FirstNet Authority's self-sustaining model, which is directing $2 billion back into coverage expansion nationwide. These tangible results highlight both the promise of FirstNet and the importance of strong federal oversight to ensure public safety continues to receive prioritized service.

We also face an alarming rise in physical threats to communications infrastructure. In San Bernardino County, we've responded to cases of vandalism, sabotage, and even targeted acts of terrorism against towers and network nodes. These attacks jeopardize emergency response capabilities across rural, urban, and suburban settings. Ensuring the resilience of these systems requires both digital and physical security measures.

Further, our geography presents unique challenges. The San Andreas Fault bisects San Bernardino County. A significant earthquake could disrupt microwave systems—rendering critical network links inoperable due to physical misalignment. Unlike microwave, cellular towers offer greater survivability post-disaster and more rapid restoration timelines. To increase redundancy in our rural areas, we've also deployed Starlink satellite systems with outstanding results. In fact, I rely on Starlink personally at my own rural home, where traditional broadband service is unavailable.

**Cybersecurity**

FirstNet was designed with a dedicated core, a security operations center, and mission-critical standards informed directly by public safety input. That means the same protections against

cyberattack or network congestion apply equally to law enforcement, fire, and EMS. Resilient backhaul, surge capacity, and deployable assets must remain at the forefront of federal reinvestment priorities.

In San Bernardino County, we have firsthand experience with this challenge. A malicious email compromised critical systems – causing deputies to conduct traffic stops without access to license plate information, dispatchers to lose access to criminal histories, and our computer-aided dispatch system to go offline. Although we restored the system, the disruption posed significant risks and highlighted vulnerabilities in our infrastructure.

This was not an isolated incident. Across the country, cyberattacks have disrupted Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs), Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) systems, and radio towers – crippling emergency response capabilities. In our own county, we have experienced not only cyberattacks but also repeated acts of physical vandalism targeting critical communication towers, as well as incidents of terrorism directed at cellular infrastructure. Our emergency systems cannot afford to remain this vulnerable.

What's needed now is strong, consistent federal leadership to establish and enforce nationwide cybersecurity standards – ensuring that emergency systems remain resilient, secure, and fully operational when lives are on the line.

**Elevating the Role of Public Safety Telecommunicators**

Congress must pass the 911 SAVES Act to reclassify public safety telecommunicators from "administrative and clerical" roles to protective service occupations.

This change acknowledges that telecommunicators are the critical first responders – guiding callers through lifesaving first aid, providing negotiation support during hostage situations, and gathering vital information in active shooter incidents. Reclassification will also grant access to enhanced training funding and expanded mental health resources.

As MCSA agencies employing thousands of these dedicated professionals, we recognize and deeply value their indispensable role in safeguarding the public and supporting our deputies' safety.

To protect American lives, Congress must act decisively to modernize our emergency response systems. This means:

- Passing legislation to implement true Next Generation 9-1-1 capabilities,
- Securing sustained, flexible funding for essential upgrades,
- Extending FirstNet's authorization and enforcing public safety prioritization standards,
- Establishing strong federal cybersecurity protections,
- Promoting interoperability and redundancy across carriers, platforms, and frequencies,
- Supporting direct-to-county administrative pathways for infrastructure funding, and
- Elevating the classification of 911 telecommunicators.

**Conclusion**

My agency – and every public safety agency – relies on resilient, modern communications systems to safeguard our communities. From delivering life-saving alerts, to responding to 9-1-1 calls, to coordinating with our fire, EMS, and federal partners, these systems are the backbone of public safety. FirstNet is not an experiment; it is an integral part of our operations today. But unless we act, the FirstNet Authority will expire in 2027, and our progress toward true Next Generation 9-1-1 will stall.

On behalf of the Major County Sheriffs of America and the millions of citizens we serve, I respectfully urge Congress to:

- Pass legislation to upgrade America to true Next Generation 9-1-1 capabilities and modernize emergency response networks with a focus on cybersecurity, resiliency, and real-time data.
- Fund these essential upgrades to ensure every community – large or small, urban or rural – has access to the same life-saving technology.
- Remove the sunset provision on the FirstNet Authority, allowing this proven governance model to continue expanding coverage and reinvesting billions back into the network without taxpayer dollars.
- Establish federal cybersecurity standards for emergency systems, so that critical networks remain hardened against both malicious attacks and natural disasters.

Let me be clear: public safety does not need more fractured or duplicative systems. We must build on the proven success of our Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network and the advances of Next Generation 9-1-1. In doing so, we will continue the momentum toward true

interoperability, real-time intelligence, and unified command—delivering the communications capabilities that every American deserves when lives are on the line.

The path forward is clear, the need is urgent, and the benefits are undeniable. Now is the time for Congress to act.