

**REMARKS OF
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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
EYE OF THE STORM: BROADCASTERS' ROLE IN EMERGENCIES
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Good morning. Thank you to the National Association of Broadcasters for having me here today and thank you to the journalists, academics, and public safety officials who are joining us for this important discussion about the role of broadcasters in emergencies.

At the risk of being obvious, this discussion is timely. Really, really, timely. As every one of us here knows, a false emergency alert went out across the state of Hawaii on Saturday, January 13th. The residents of the Aloha State woke to ominous messages flashing on their mobile phones, streaming in from social media, booming from radio stations, and lighting up their television screens. These messages commanded all who saw and heard them to seek immediate shelter due to a ballistic missile threat. They included the haunting words: “This is not a drill.”

Years ago, I had the privilege of working for the people of the state of Hawaii when I served as counsel to the late Senator Daniel Inouye. So I know its residents are graceful and resilient. I am sure, too, that they are aware—like all of us—of new vulnerabilities in the Pacific. But I also know they never should have had to endure this false alarm. And like them, I held my children close that evening, grateful for our safety and security.

To get a feel for what happened from one who was there, I spoke to Chris Leonard. I’ve known Chris since my days working for Senator Inouye. He runs a group of radio stations in Hilo and Kona and for many years has served as the esteemed President of the Hawaii Association of Broadcasters. He described last Saturday morning to me in chilling detail. But what struck me most from my conversation with him was his sense of duty. Minutes after the alarm went out he was on the road, en route to his station, because, as he said, “that’s what broadcasters do.”

It’s true. In times of crisis, broadcasters stand on the front lines. From the earliest days of the iconic beeps of the Emergency Broadcast System, broadcasters have been an essential part of our public safety response. Today, those systems have evolved into the Emergency Alert System, with a mix of nationwide, state, and local capabilities. Moreover, they now come together with Wireless Emergency Alerts through the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

But as last Saturday demonstrated, we have work to do. To get to the bottom of what happened and help ensure it never happens again, the Chairman announced an immediate investigation. This is a good thing—and it was the right call. As a result,

Commission staff have been in close contact with federal and state officials, gathering facts about how this false alert was issued.

While initial reports suggest human error played a significant role, there are many actors at the federal and state level who can take concrete steps to improve alerting protocols. We need to look at everything from state training and practices to improved user interfaces for public safety that can reduce the likelihood of error. We need to understand why it took a full 38 minutes to fully correct this false alarm. We also need to consider how the Commission can help develop best practices for alerts that can be used by federal, state, and local authorities. Moreover, the Commission can encourage the use of best practices through the EAS state plans that are already required for annual filing at the agency. In addition, the Commission should work with our colleagues at FEMA to align traditional daisy chain reporting practices with newer federal alert aggregation capabilities. Finally, we need to act with urgency. We should commit right now to having changes in place before the Summer begins.

I also believe something I discussed with Chris: In all of this review, we need the broadcasting community at the table. That's true in our investigation in Washington and it's true in what the state government is pulling together, pursuant to the Executive Order of Governor Ige appointing Brigadier General Kenneth Hara to oversee a comprehensive review of emergency management practices in Hawaii. Public sector efforts to remedy what went wrong will only go so far if they do not also include the private sector actors entrusted with getting the word out. And no one has a longer history and deeper commitment to getting the word out than our nation's broadcasters.

To be clear, false alerts like this are not unique to Hawaii. On a smaller scale they have occurred before—and just recently in Polk County, Iowa and Riverside County, California—and can occur again if we don't heed the lessons learned from this incident.

In the end, I think no one has summed this up better than Senator Brian Schatz of Hawaii, who just yesterday convened an important discussion with a wide range of federal and state authorities who can help address what happened in Hawaii. As he stated: "This system failed miserably. We need to improve it, and get it right." Amen. Let's get to work. Let's get this done.

Let's also remember that while Hawaii dominates the headlines, in the last year so many broadcasters played a vital role in helping communities weather other emergencies and disasters. By most measures, the damage done last year by Mother Nature was unprecedented. In fact, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reports that hurricanes, wildfires, and other natural disasters led to \$306 billion in damages, making last year the most expensive on record in the United States. Moreover, the hurricanes and wildfires combined took more than 300 lives. Simply put, the emotional and economic toll of these events will be felt by generations.

In each of these events, however, broadcasters stood out. In some cases, quite literally. We had correspondents and camera crews standing in flooded streets and

camped out near dangerous fire. As wildfires ripped through the dry hills of southern California, stations like KCBS/KCAL in Los Angeles doubled down on news, adding an additional 40 hours of live coverage in order to ensure residents of affected communities had access to the best and most current information. During Hurricane Harvey, KTRK in Houston produced over 128 hours of news coverage, helping coordinate volunteer rescue efforts that pulled residents from rising waters and flooded homes.

The damage we saw from weather events was especially acute in Puerto Rico. During Hurricane Maria, broadcasters served as a lifeline. When the roof was torn off news/talk radio WKAQ in San Juan, it did not stop broadcasting to the community. When the storm smashed its windows, it stayed on air, eventually fashioning a makeshift studio deeper in its building. As the wind and rain wreaked havoc, the station aired calls from listeners offering stories about the storm and its impact. The station also fielded calls from Florida, New York, and Chicago from family members seeking information about their relatives who they could not reach due to broader communications failures.

I think these broadcasters are heroes. But we owe them—and the people impacted by this hurricane season—the kind of attention to emergency communications we are now offering Hawaii. It is time for the Commission to commit to hearings and a report making clear what worked, what didn't and what steps we can take to improve our communications vulnerabilities in the wake of Hurricanes Maria, Harvey, and Irma. After all, there's precedent for this approach. It's exactly what was done in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy. I know we learned from those events and as a result our communications systems are stronger and more resilient. I bet, there are lessons, too, to be learned here. I also bet that the role of broadcasters in keeping communities safe was a big one—and I want us to do what we can to ensure that continues.

Thank you.