

Written Statement  
Of

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“Reliability of the District’s 911 Call System”

Before the  
Council of the District of Columbia  
Committee on the Judiciary

Thursday, September 20, 2012

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding the critical importance of reliable and resilient 9-1-1 systems in our nation's capital.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Federal Communications Commission, primarily through the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, works hand-in-hand with local, state, Federal, and tribal public safety partners, to enhance the reliability of our nation's communications infrastructure. Nowhere is our responsibility to promote public safety more important than with regard to 9-1-1 services and availability. While we are always very concerned whenever there is a substantial communications outage, we are especially concerned when an outage affects the public's ability to obtain help through 9-1-1. So we appreciate the opportunity to address the Committee's concerns regarding the reliability of the District's 9-1-1 call system and in particular, the June derecho storm.

Given the District of Columbia's unique communications needs, it is even more essential, particularly in times of major emergencies, such as during and after a natural disaster, that communications networks keep the citizens of the District connected to each other and to the help they may need.

Today I will focus my discussion on the impact of-- and the FCC's response to-- the recent derecho storm that hit parts of the central, mid-Atlantic and northeastern United States in late June and highlight recent efforts by the FCC to make our nation's critical communications infrastructure more resilient.

Before I begin addressing the derecho, which will generate lessons to benefit many more jurisdictions than were directly affected by the storm, I want to make two comments specific to the District.

First, I want to commend the District on a recent public safety initiative -- Smart911- that I learned about on the radio, from advertisements that were intended to spur sign-ups in the District. It is both timely and can enhance public safety for the District's residents by enabling use of an enhancement to 9-1-1 that allows residents to create a personal profile that is integrated into the 9-1-1 system. This is an innovative program with the potential to streamline and enhance the effectiveness of emergency response. This sort of initiative is not in use everywhere and it reflects innovative efforts by DC public safety officials to improve safety. So I applaud the District and the Office of Unified Communications that initiated this effort.

Second, I want to note that the Bureau for which I am the Chief has become acquainted over the years with some of the practices of the District's call center. While we do not perform comprehensive audits of individual PSAPS or call centers, we are aware that the District's center follows important best practices aimed at diversity, including dual selective routers, diverse trunking paths and even an alternate call center in a separate location.

## **THE JUNE DERECHO STORM**

### **The Derecho's Impact on Communications**

As all of you are well aware, the June 29th derecho weather system dramatically affected emergency communications over wide swaths of the United States, including, significantly, our local region. Millions of homes and businesses across the District, Maryland and Virginia lost electrical power during the storms with restoration taking up to a week in some areas, all during an excessive heat warning. A state of emergency was declared in the District as many needed help urgently; live electrical wires came down, trees crushed occupied homes and vehicles, and other emergencies unfolded. Indeed when it was all said and done, 22 individuals lost their lives across the entire impacted area.

The good news is that in many areas of the storm's path, communications services held up very well. The vast majority of those in the path of the derecho were able to continue to use wireline and mobile communications networks effectively and reliably: to make calls, reach 9-1-1, and get help. The great majority of 9-1-1 call centers, including the District's, were able to receive calls and location information, and to dispatch help accordingly. It was also the case that dedicated radio services for the public safety community and first responders seem to have been mostly unaffected by the storm.

However, there were also serious carrier network failures that clearly demonstrated that telecommunications networks lacked needed and vital resiliency. Just outside the city for example, and for various lengths of time, millions lost the ability to reach 9-1-1 operators and some of those who attempted to make emergency calls found their wireless service unavailable or their calls blocked. Call volume increases combined with cell site and other outages complicated efforts to originate calls to secure emergency help. The District experienced some dropped wireless calls.

The FCC is particularly concerned that carrier network failures hit some 9-1-1 facilities especially hard in the Washington metropolitan area. The public's inability to reach 9-1-1 and obtain emergency assistance during the derecho was not just a theoretical or abstract concern, nor is it such in connection with other natural disasters. Whether and how fast help can be called and a first responder arrives might make the difference between a life lost or the possibility of a healthy future.

### **The FCC's Response**

For our part, in responding to the derecho, the Commission immediately began to monitor and respond to the communications outages caused by the storm, including those severely impacting the 9-1-1 services in our region. To accomplish this, we utilized the FCC's Operations Center, which is staffed 24 hours a day 7 days a week and we engaged in direct outreach to carriers and other affected by the storms. We collected key data, supported by pre-established information reporting protocols. We issued Situation

Reports, providing our government partners with details of the damage and the pace of recovery. We also used the FCC's web-site and social media to issue a set of consumer tips for communicating during an emergency.

Then, on July 18<sup>th</sup>, the Commission initiated an inquiry by issuing a Public Notice to learn the causes of the outages and the effect on 9-1-1 systems and services. The Public Notice also asks a number of questions regarding 9-1-1 resiliency and reliability more generally. Importantly, the inquiry covers both disruptions that affected the 9-1-1 call centers and those that affected cell sites, network interconnection, switches, and other facilities. The goal of this inquiry is simple –we want to use what we learn to make people safer. About two weeks ago we received reply comments in response to our Public Notice and we are continuing to gather information. Thus far we have interviewed some 25 or more PSAPs and at least a half dozen carriers one or more times.

As we continue to conduct our inquiry and review the record, we are learning that not all carriers have exactly the same problems in providing reliable 9-1-1 networks. For example, not all carriers adequately monitored and implemented important best practices and technical announcements from standards organizations that specifically target reducing 9-1-1 carrier network outages. Additionally, there are some important differences on how carriers ensure that necessary redundancy is preserved in the routing of emergency circuits, including the circuits that carry location information.

After we have completed a full review of the record, and before the end of this year, we will produce a public report on what we learned from the derecho.