

**Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
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“Hurricane Katrina and Communications Services in the Gulf Coast States”

Statement of

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Thank you Mr. Chairman, Commissioner Abernathy, Commissioner Copps, and Commissioner Adelstein for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Willis Carter and I am the First Vice President of APCO International, the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials. I am also Chief of Communications for the Shreveport, Louisiana Fire Department, serving a total of 34 years with the department, the last 20 of which have been in my current position.

First of all, I want to thank the Commission for its efforts to facilitate emergency communications in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. The dedication of your staff is to be commended.

APCO International has been working closely with the public safety agencies in the affected areas, first to provide whatever assistance we can to the individuals and agencies involved, and second to gather information so that we may learn from this

disaster and be better prepared in the future. Through a variety of mechanisms, our members from across the nation have also been coming to the aid of their colleagues in the hardest hit areas, providing both professional and personal assistance whenever possible.

Through its role as a FCC-certified frequency coordinator, APCO International has been closely involved with securing radio communications capability for emergency response agencies in the affected areas, and has worked with public safety agencies in those areas to restore communications operations that were disrupted by the hurricane. I note that APCO International has done so while waiving its normal frequency coordination fees.

Fortunately, my home town of Shreveport, which is in northwest Louisiana, escaped the wrath of Katrina. However, last week, I had the opportunity to go on a fact-finding mission to many of the affected areas. I have also had extensive communication with my colleagues from other public safety agencies throughout Louisiana. My statement today will summarize some of my observations, offer other information that APCO International has gathered, and present some general concerns that APCO International has as we move forward to improve public safety communications capabilities.

On Monday September 5, I traveled to St. Tammany Parish, which is located on the north side of Lake Pontchartraine. There I toured seven dispatch centers. The devastation that I witnessed was unimaginable. Public safety call takers and dispatchers were working and living in their communications centers. Some had lost their homes, and most had suffered significant damage, but all were on the job and still attempting to

provide help and assistance to the thousands of citizens in need. Communications capabilities were at best very limited. The primary tower site which supports the parish radio system had been damaged, but was still affording limited service. The entire area of Slidell, Louisiana was without power and relying on emergency backup power sources. The Covington area had some power restored. 9-1-1 was totally out of service.

I departed St. Tammany Parish on Tuesday, and traveled to St. Charles Parish, which is adjacent to Jefferson Parish and on the west side of New Orleans proper. This area did not endure the direct blunt of the storm, and although sustaining somewhat less damage than what I had seen the day before, they were nonetheless facing significant challenges with limited radio communications, and a total outage of 9-1-1. I was to find that the worst was yet to come. The Jefferson Parish Communications Center was in much more dire circumstances. Communication to field units was very limited, access to 9-1-1 was completely out, and the call takers and dispatchers were experiencing the impact of the stress of working, sleeping, and eating in their dispatch center since the storm hit five days earlier. The Fire Dispatch Commander told me that he had lost five dispatch personnel since the storm due to the fact that the stress associated with this tragic event had prompted them to simply walk out. My attempts to reach the New Orleans Police dispatch center and the New Orleans Fire dispatch center were unsuccessful. Flooding prevented access to either of these centers which had both been evacuated. 9-1-1 was totally inaccessible, and the majority of public safety communications were not functioning.

There were several factors that contributed to the public safety communications outages in all of these areas. The damage caused by the hurricane winds either destroyed

or seriously damaged many primary tower and transmitter sites. The ensuing power outage which engulfed the area required the use of emergency power generators, many of which had been damaged or destroyed by flying debris and rising water. Many of those that remained in operation were faced with exhausted fuel supply either by disruption of natural gas supply lines, or the fact that there was no way to get diesel fuel into them as the result of flooding. Some communications sites were simply swallowed up by the flood waters. Bell South central offices, which served as 9-1-1 tandems, were flooded, which created outages of 9-1-1 service in as many as thirteen parishes.

In all, I visited four parishes and had the opportunity to visit a total of nine communications centers. I saw devastation and despair in every direction, and I also saw the same basic problems in all areas. Lack of coordinated incident command and control, lack of direct support for communications centers and their personnel, and the inability to communicate were obvious problems in every area that I visited.

Today, most of the area's emergency communications are operating at least in a limited capacity. However, there is still much to be done to restore full communications capabilities which in some cases will require the rebuilding of total networks.

Much attention has been given to the communications problems that occurred in the wake of Katrina. We are still gathering information from the field, but a few observations can be made, even at this early date:

- PSAPs and other emergency communications centers must be considered as core elements of the first response structure, and the staff of those facilities needs the support of all levels of government.

- Planning and training for disasters are essential, and plans need to be properly executed when disasters strike.
- There must be common incident command structures at all levels of the emergency response effort. A disaster is no time to question who is in charge.
- Funding must be available to ensure that public safety communications networks are built and maintained to withstand worse-case scenarios. Plans must also be in place to restore facilities that, despite best efforts, are disrupted.
- Telephone central offices supporting 9-1-1 tandems must be “mirrored” in locations sufficiently remote to allow for quick restoration of 9-1-1 services.
- Reserved, interoperable radio spectrum should be available for disaster related deployment of supplemental and replacement radio systems.
- Public safety agencies must have adequate funding and radio spectrum to operate robust, interoperable radio communications systems with state-of-the-art capabilities.

Mr. Chairman, just as September 11th, 2001 helped to focus the nation on the communications issues facing our first responders, Hurricane Katrina has revealed that much still needs to be accomplished to provide public safety personnel with the communications tools they need to protect the safety of life and property. We look forward to working with you, the Congress, and other parties in this critical effort.