



COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

David Price (D-NC), Chairman, Subcommittee on Homeland Security

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OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DAVID PRICE *DHS Interoperable Communications Programs* *March 17, 2009 / 10:00 am*

In the seven-and-a-half years since the 9/11 attacks, there has been heightened concern about the ability or inability of our nation's emergency responders to communicate with one another during crises. The need for firefighters, emergency medical personnel, and law enforcement to talk to one another, and for Federal emergency workers to be able to communicate with each, is all too clear when disasters strike and our citizens require a coordinated government response. While progress has been made promoting interoperability, we in Congress hear almost daily about shortcomings preventing effective emergency communications.

DHS has a three-fold approach to solving the interoperability puzzle, and we have witnesses from each organization with us today:

- Dr. David Boyd is Director of the Office of Interoperability and Compatibility. OIC, as it is more commonly known, conducts interoperability-related research, promulgates technical standards, and works to develop new communications tools.

- Mr. Chris Essid is Director of the Office of Emergency Communications, or OEC. This office is responsible for coordinating national interoperable communications policy, guiding State planning efforts, and providing technical and training assistance to the emergency responder community.
- Mr. Ross Ashley is Assistant Administrator of the FEMA Grants Program Directorate, which is responsible for reviewing and awarding State interoperable communications grants. The FEMA Grants Directorate also works with the Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration to distribute funds from the Public Safety Interoperability Communications grant program.

The fundamental question all of us have is this: why aren't we making faster progress toward effective interoperability? The Federal government has a structure at DHS that appears to cover the full continuum of interoperability from research and development to policy to acquisition and training. In 2007, 56 Statewide Interoperability Communications Plans were submitted to DHS, which then reviewed and approved them in 2008. Congress has also provided multiple sources of funding to allow States and localities to invest in network upgrades and acquire new equipment.

However, one must only look as far as the severe communications problems during the response to Hurricane Katrina, or more recent difficulties during last summer's wildfires, such as those in Big Sur, California, to see that the interoperability problem is far from being solved.

This Committee directly controls the funding that helps States and localities improve their communications and to purchase equipment meeting interoperability standards. In 2009, we appropriated \$50 million for interoperable communications grants, the same as in 2008.

Furthermore, \$1 billion in grant funding was provided by Congress for the Public Safety Interoperable Communications grant program in 2007. Mr. Ashley, we need an update on award of these funds, and whether you think the money is being successfully invested to meet State and local needs.

The research, policy, and training programs at OIC and OEC help the emergency responder community make effective interoperability decisions. I am pleased that all of the States and territories now have Federally-approved interoperable communications plans, and see that as a major accomplishment of which DHS can be proud. However, we need to be vigilant that these plans are implemented rapidly, and do not gather dust on a shelf. Mr. Essid and Dr. Boyd, we need to know how you will make sure these plans are turned into reality.

You gentlemen know better than anyone that simply purchasing the right equipment does not solve our interoperable communications challenges. There need to be workable plans in place to manage the conversion to new technology and procedures, along with robust training for the actual operators of the system. I will be interested to hear about your efforts to ensure that the award of federal grants for equipment is accompanied by serious efforts to train and prepare the state and local users. That way we can arrive at successful results and not waste any money in the process.

Most broadly speaking, we also have to discuss Federal management of the public airwaves. While this Committee does not have jurisdiction over the FCC, which administers the radio spectrum, decisions that agency makes directly affect DHS's interoperable communications programs.

In early 2008, the FCC attempted to auction the "D block" of the 700 MHz band and have the private sector build a national broadband network for emergency responders. However,

the auction failed, and the FCC Office of Inspector General reported bidders were scared off by the risk that costs for a robust emergency network could exceed revenues from broadband subscriptions. Since then, many have questioned whether a nationwide emergency network managed by the private sector is necessary for interoperable communications, or even a good idea. An alternative approach would simply allocate spectrum licenses to regional entities that could then construct and manage publicly-owned networks. I would like to hear from all of our witnesses about the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach, including how rapidly such networks could be deployed, what costs could or should be shouldered by the Federal government, and whether such a technological solution is even feasible.

Clearly we have a full agenda of many interesting topics. Gentlemen, we thank you for appearing before the Committee today, and we look forward to your testimony. Please summarize your written statements in a 5 minute presentation. Dr. Boyd, you will begin, followed by Mr. Essid and then Mr. Ashley. Before you start, however, let me turn to Ranking Member Hal Rogers for his opening comments.

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