

**Statement of**  
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**Before the**  
**Subcommittee on**  
**National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations**  
**Committee on Government Reform**  
**House of Representatives**  
**United States Congress**

**“Look Who’s Talking Now”**

**July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004**

Chairman Shays, Ranking Member Kucinich, and Members of the House Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations: my name Glenn P. Corbett. I am an Assistant Professor of Fire Science at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. I also serve as a Captain in the Waldwick, New Jersey Fire Department and as Technical Editor of Fire Engineering magazine, a 127 year old fire service trade journal. I want to thank you for inviting me to speak on the very important topic of public safety communications. I would like to provide you with my observations of emergency communications in the New York City metropolitan area as well as provide you with a set of general recommendations.

Effective communications are the lifeblood of all emergency responses, determining the level of success that is achieved. As has been well documented, gaps in communications had disastrous results at the World Trade Center on 9/11. More than 100 firefighters likely never heard evacuation orders to leave the North Tower, although police officers in the same structure were able to escape. Lack of radio interoperability and separate command structures of the New York's Fire (FDNY) and Police (NYPD) Departments stood in the way of the survival of these firefighters.

Nearly three years have passed since the disaster at the World Trade Center, with some progress having been made in New York City and the metropolitan region. We still have a very long way to go, however. Significant monetary, technical, bureaucratic, and political hurdles are in our path.

Since 9/11, FDNY and the NYPD have taken steps to integrate their communications for large-scale incidents. They have, for example, ensured that NYPD helicopters will carry FDNY chiefs who can communicate to FDNY units on the ground. They have also provided radio equipment to senior level FDNY and NYPD officers who can communicate with each other.

The FDNY itself has instituted the use of the "post" radio, a portable signal amplifier that allows for better communications in high-rise structures. The unit is, however, currently limited to command officer to command officer radio transmissions and must be physically taken up in the building to a floor level near the "fire floor." Utilization of this equipment places an extra "middleman" in the communications chain. For example, orders to evacuate the building from the lobby command post must first go through the chief officer on the fire floor and then re-communicated by this chief to the firefighters themselves. Many people consider the post radio to be a temporary fix, with a long-term permanent solution still years away.

These improvements still leave significant problems to overcome. The FDNY still cannot communicate effectively in many subway locales, although plans are apparently underway to improve this situation. This is the case despite the fact that the Metropolitan Transit Authority has had subway radio communications capabilities for some time.

It must be pointed out that poor communications are not just a "radio problem" but an issue involving radios, antennas, signal amplifiers such as repeaters, and the like. For example, achieving proper communications in a tall high-rise might necessitate the use of powerful radios in conjunction with a repeater installed in the building. Who pays for this equipment is also an issue; while the radio is typically a "city purchase," the repeater may need to be purchased and installed by the building owner.

Perhaps even more problematic is the issue of interoperability in the context of New York City's new "Citywide Incident Command System" (CIMS). This new response protocol – in my opinion – greatly complicates responses to chemical/biological/radiological terrorist attacks and "normal" hazardous materials releases. It places the NYPD in charge of "assessment" while placing the FDNY in charge of "life safety" at such incidents. The net result is that both FDNY and NYPD have personnel operating in the dangerous "hot zone" of the incident, both under separate tactical level commanders and operating with different communications equipment.

Communications problems are woven throughout this New York City "battle of the badges," most recently surfacing during a mock drill involving a subway attack. A firefighter was thrown to the ground when he attempted to pass a police officer who was securing an area due to the presence of a suspected secondary explosive device.

Communication challenges remain outside of New York City as well. Bergen County, New Jersey (where I am a Fire Captain) has 69 fire departments and over 100 police and emergency medical service agencies. This multiplicity of emergency response organizations obviously complicates communications. While nine mutual aid organizations have existed for decades to coordinate the 69 fire departments within the county, radio frequency and channel standardization has been difficult at best. Although Bergen County has established a common frequency for all fire apparatus, this one single frequency would be quickly overloaded in a major disaster.

Only recently have portable radios been issued to “coordinators” of the nine mutual aid groups in order to organize large-scale responses. These radios, however, only allow for communications between the mutual aid coordinators and Bergen County’s Office of Emergency Management. Interoperability between the multitude of agencies within Bergen County at large-scale incident, especially at the tactical level, remains an elusive need.

Considering that another major terrorist attack on the order of 9/11 in the New York City area would necessitate a region-wide response involving multiple counties and possibly states, the problems grow exponentially. Although some progress in terms of integrating a multi-jurisdictional response has been made at the state level in both New York and New Jersey, I do not believe that the tangled communication snake pit has been straightened out.

While New York City and its metropolitan region are unique in several respects, many of the public safety communication issues that I have identified are applicable across the country. I have prepared the following recommendations to address these concerns:

- *The new Department Of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Interoperability and Compatibility must take a proactive role in equipment purchases at the state and local levels:* Secretary Ridge recently announced the creation of this office within DHS. There is critical need for this entity to take a close look at how federal funds are being dispersed for acquisition of communication equipment at the state and local levels, specifically how these purchases fit into the big region-wide picture in each state(s). This review could take place as part of DHS’ role in the review of local “emergency operations plans” through the enactment of the National Incident Management System protocol. DHS should also more forcefully encourage interstate communications agreements where appropriate.
- *States should be more forceful in ensuring proper communications planning at the county and local levels:* The states play a crucial role in overcoming turf battles within their borders. Too often, inter-jurisdictional jealousies lead to improper response protocols with a corresponding communications gap.
- *Ensure interoperability at the responder tactical level:* While improvements have been made for interoperable communications at the jurisdiction-to-jurisdiction levels and strategic levels, this capability has not reached the tactical level in many cases. When large-scale incidents occur, it is necessary for lower level personnel working together from multiple jurisdictions to communicate with each other.
- *SAFECOM should increase their efforts to ensure that equipment is interchangeable:* Proprietary technology creates immense barriers to purchases by state and local governments. Jurisdictions should not find themselves “locked into” a particular vendor and the equipment purchased should not be an impediment to interoperable communications.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify. I would welcome any questions that you may have.

