

STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY, EMERGING THREATS, AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY, INFORMATION POLICY,
INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS, AND THE CENSUS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Good morning, Chairman Shays and Chairman Putnam, Ranking Member Kucinich, Ranking Member Clay, and Members of the Committees. Thank you for inviting me to speak about the communication challenges facing the first responder community. My remarks will focus on the Administration's strategy and progress to date in working with state, local, and tribal governments and organizations to address these challenges. Additionally, I will discuss our expected next steps and goals to successfully resolve with the community, this interoperability issue. Successful achievement of interoperable communications for all first responders throughout our country continues to be a priority for the Administration.

Background

As you know, OMB, working with Federal agencies, identified in the fall of 2001, 24 government-wide opportunities to simplify and consolidate redundant Federal programs, preventing unnecessary waste of taxpayer dollars. One of those opportunities was in the area of wireless communications, and became the Project SAFECOM electronic government (e-gov) initiative. Additionally, the President's Management Council (consisting of Department Deputy Secretaries) identified SAFECOM as one of three initiatives out of the 24 as a top priority.

The goal of SAFECOM is to provide interoperable wireless solutions for Federal, state, and local public safety organizations and ensure they can communicate and share information in response to emergency incidents. SAFECOM is the umbrella program for all Federal interoperability efforts and will work with State and local interoperability initiatives. SAFECOM will oversee several functions including coordination of all Federal interoperability efforts, development of a strategy including a short and long term vision and milestones to enhance first responder interoperability, and ensuring continued progress on SAFECOM-related initiatives. SAFECOM is working to ensure that Federal programs will encourage planning for and implementation of systems and agreements at

all levels that leverage existing capabilities and focus interim procurement and fielding actions to enhance interoperable communications.

As a result, the SAFECOM e-gov initiative is at the center of the Administration's strategy to address interoperability challenges. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is the managing partner with six additional agencies as partner agencies. The partner agencies include the Departments of Defense, Energy, Interior, Justice, Health and Human Services, and Agriculture. All of these agencies have significant roles to play in public safety communications, emergency/incident response and management, and law enforcement.

Specifically, SAFECOM's achievements and next steps include:

- **Develop common grant guidance.** The program has developed common guidance and plans to fully integrate it across the Federal government.
- **Sponsor the development of standards.** These standards will support a rational migration to national interoperability. This work is currently ongoing in partnership with the National Institute of Standards and Technology.
- **Create an interoperable information clearinghouse.** In addition to a programmatic web site, SAFECOM will create a clearinghouse for information related to interoperability. Estimated development is March 2004.

Challenges to Achieving Effective First Responder Communication

It is abundantly clear that in order for first responders and other public safety officials to effectively prevent, respond, and recover from disasters, whether natural or terrorist initiated, they must be able to depend on interoperable communications. Unfortunately, until recently, each Federal agency had their own policies, standards, and equipment for the individual programs they administered. This problem was compounded at the state and local level as each group (police, firefighters, etc.) each used their own equipment, standards, and procedures. Additional challenges identified include:

- **Limited and fragmented radio spectrum** – The spectrum allocated to the public safety community has been given out gradually over the last 75 years based on availability and requirements at particular times. As a result, public safety's spectrum is scattered across the multiple frequencies. Public safety has had to compete with commercial and other users of spectrum for a scarce resource, and increasing interference has been caused by heavy spectrum usage.
- **Limited and fragmented planning and cooperation** – There are over 2.5 million public safety first responders in some 45,000 agencies. Many of these agencies are small, often volunteer organizations with limited budgets, no engineering expertise, and a

distrust of Federal mandates. These agencies usually plan based on only their own local, intradepartmental needs.

The Federal government has also contributed to fragmented planning and funding in the past. Efforts to achieve interoperability have previously not been coordinated, funding and grants have been distributed without common guidance and Federal public safety agencies have not achieved interoperability between themselves.

- Limited and fragmented funding – There is insufficient funding in place to solve the nation’s interoperability problem. Cost estimates are commonly estimated at over \$15B and do not always include the costs of retraining, new infrastructure, or essential maintenance of new systems.

Additionally, a multitude of programs on the Federal level provide funding for interoperable communications with no coordination of system requirements. In addition, State and local agencies have different acquisition requirements, planning cycles and technical requirements. In effect, each agency may be in a different stage of technology replacement.

Working in partnership with state, local, and tribal governments, SAFECOM will help to overcome some of these challenges. The initiative’s goal to coordinate and simplify the Federal role in achieving interoperability is a critical part of our nation’s ability to address this problem.

Coordination Across the Federal Government

As stated, SAFECOM’s mission is to serve as the umbrella program within the Federal government to help local, tribal, State and Federal public safety agencies improve public safety response through more effective and efficient interoperable wireless communications. In addition to these groups and Federal agencies, SAFECOM is also working in partnership with other Federal offices with a role in this area.

SAFECOM and Department of Justice’s Advanced Generation of Interoperability for Law Enforcement (AGILE) program are working together on a daily basis to make sure that tasks are coordinated and resources are used as effectively as possible. SAFECOM and AGILE will also be holding a joint planning session in early December to further coordinate their activities. Another agency, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) obviously has a critical role in solving the issue of limited and fragmented spectrum, one of the key issues preventing interoperability.

Conclusion

The Administration will continue to work collaboratively across Federal agencies, with Congress, and State and local governments, to overcome the interoperability challenges facing first responders. To date, we have achieved some critical milestones along that path such as the coordination of grant funding across agencies.

While great strides have been made toward improving interoperability for our nation's first responders, this is not a problem that can be solved overnight – or even in a year or two. Particularly, as over 90 percent of the nation's public safety infrastructure is owned at the local and State level.

Collaborating with the public safety community, we need to continue to work toward developing a common set of requirements and standards for public safety communications. We also need a better understanding of existing solutions and where the gaps exist between the functionality those systems provide and what is needed for interoperability. All of these issues are currently being addressed by SAFECOM and their partners.

I look forward to working with the Committees on our shared goals to achieve interoperability and overcome other challenges on the path toward realizing effective and efficient first responder communications.