

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY, EMERGING THREATS,  
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
Christopher Shays, Connecticut  
Chairman  
Room B-372 Rayburn Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515  
Tel: 202 225-2548  
Fax: 202 225-2382  
E-mail: hr.groc@mail.house.gov

## **Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays November 6, 2003**

More than a year before September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the National Security Subcommittee heard testimony from first responders who had just participated in a tabletop exercise of emergency responses to a chemical attack. Among the first casualties in that scenario were internal and external communications between federal, state and local officials.

On September 15<sup>th</sup> of this year, we observed a similar exercise, with similar results. Fully two years after what many saw as a wake up call from hell, too many first responders still can't hear the alarm. Despite significant expenditures and some progress, public safety and emergency response communications remain a high tech Tower of Babel splintered by different electromagnetic, political and fiscal languages.

What stands in the way of first responder interoperability? Major impediments appear to be less a question of hardware or software than wetware – the human circuitry that must power enhanced connectivity. Linking more than 44,000 state and local agencies and over 100 federal programs and offices for effective emergency response challenges entrenched cultures of intergovernmental mistrust. Interoperability threatens old ways of doing business while pitting public uses of limited radio frequency spectrum against new commercial wireless applications.

Efforts like the Wireless Public Safety Interoperable Communications Program, called "SAFECOM," in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) face daunting near and long-term obstacles: old and incompatible equipment not yet due to be replaced, misaligned planning and funding cycles, and narrow, fragmented public safety spectrum bands crowded between bursting commercial uses. In Connecticut's 4<sup>th</sup> District, which I represent, interference on public safety bands is a serious and growing problem.

Central to the apparent intractability of all these issues is the lack of technology and performance standards for interoperability. Unless state, local and federal public safety and emergency response agencies know exactly when, how, with whom and on what frequencies they are supposed be able to communicate, there is little chance randomly implemented, vendor driven technical upgrades will produce much more than accidental interoperability.

Real time communication capability in the face of the terrorist threat is a national security imperative. When the next attack comes, lives will be lost as a result of the technical gaps, jurisdictional stovepipes and jumbled spectrum allocations still impeding effective public safety voice communications and data sharing. We need to know how, and when, SAFECOM and other federal efforts will channel the current technological and political cacophony into the seamless network that will carry our most potent weapons against terror – accurate, timely information.

I want to thank Technology Subcommittee Chairman Adam Putnam and his staff for convening this joint hearing with us today. It's a small, but fitting, example of breaching jurisdictional barriers in the cause of greater interoperability.

We thank all our witnesses for their time and for the expertise they bring to this important discussion. Welcome.