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Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays July 20, 2004

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 exposed dangerous gaps and failures in essential communication systems. Cell phone networks collapsed. First responders using incompatible radios could not relay vital information. The New York Stock Exchange shut down. But, the Federal Reserve System and the nation's banking network continued to operate. Why? Because standardization, technical inter-connectivity and redundancy protected that critical communication infrastructure.

Almost three years later, the critical telecommunication networks first responders bank on every day to save lives remain fragmented and vulnerable. Despite significant expenditures and some progress, public safety and emergency response communications still lack the bandwidth and connectivity needed to sustain essential capabilities in a major crisis. So today we revisit the status of federal efforts to improve first responder interoperability.

As we will hear in testimony, forging links between more than 44,000 state and local agencies and over 100 federal programs and offices poses daunting technical and political challenges.

The lack of interoperability accurately reflects a lack of intergovernmental consensus on the urgency, feasibility and affordability of communication upgrades. Uncoordinated planning and funding cycles seem to keep that consensus beyond reach. Disjointed federal grant programs do little to guide state and local programs toward effective short or long-term solutions. And, the push for interoperability further complicates the already intense competition between public and commercial users for choice radio frequency spectrum bands.

The recent decision by the Federal Communications Commission to clear interference from the 800 megahertz public safety bands should help improve the performance of critical systems, but crowded spectrum is only one aspect of the problem.

Another serious impediment is the lack of standardized information on the capabilities of current systems. Without broadly accepted technology and performance standards against which to measure progress, it is difficult to determine where we are, and all but impossible to know if we're getting anywhere.

After our hearing on these issues last November, we asked the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to examine current federal efforts to foster interoperability. The report issued today finds intergovernmental collaboration lacking and calls for standards, benchmarks and funding discipline to focus a currently rudderless process.

All the technical and regulatory jargon should not be allowed to obscure the central fact that lives are at stake. Selfless work on these issues by Monica Gabrielle, Sally Regenhard, Beverly Eckert, Mary Fetchet and so many other 9-11 family members reminds us of our solemn obligation to speak with one urgent voice to avoid future tragedies.

We appreciate the time, expertise and dedication our witnesses bring to this important discussion, and we look forward to their testimony.