

TESTIMONY OF
VINCENT R. STILE, PAST PRESIDENT
ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC-SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS OFFICIALS-
INTERNATIONAL, INC.
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY, INFORMATION POLICY,
INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS AND THE CENSUS

September 8, 2004

Thank you, Chairman Putnam and members of the committee. My name is Vincent Stile, and I submit this testimony today in my capacity as the immediate Past President of the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials-International, Inc. (APCO), the nation's oldest and largest public safety communications organization. I am also the Police Radio Communications Systems Director for the Suffolk County Police Department, Long Island, New York, the fourteenth largest police department in the nation, and serve as chair of the New York Metropolitan Advisory Committee (NYMAC) dealing with the concerns of radio spectrum as it affects first responders in New York City and its surrounding areas. I also serve as Vice-chair of the Department of Homeland Security Project SAFECOM Executive Committee.

Founded in 1935, APCO has over 17,000 individual members, most of whom are state or local government employees who manage and operate communications systems for police, fire, emergency medical and other public safety agencies. APCO International is a member driven association of communications professionals that provides leadership; influences public safety communications decisions of government and industry; promotes professional development; and, fosters the development and use of technology for the benefit of the public. APCO is certified by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as a frequency coordinator for state and local government public safety licensees. APCO recommends frequency assignments for applicants seeking to add or expand their communications system, with the goals preventing harmful interference to critical operations, promoting interoperability, and maximizing spectrum efficiency. APCO's frequency department consists of a full-time staff and over 55 volunteer local frequency advisors throughout the United States. Until recently, I was the primary local frequency advisor for Southern New York, and continue to serve as an alternate advisor. APCO is also deeply involved in a wide range of policy issues of concern to state and local government public safety communications, including spectrum allocation and management, deployment of Enhanced 9-1-1 services, and funding for new communications networks and systems. APCO frequently participates in proceedings regarding these issues at the FCC, before Congress, and in the Executive Branch.

I would like to begin by saying interoperability is not a new issue for public safety. It did not come in to being after the tragic events of September 11th but rather it has and continues to be a constant challenge to public safety. Interoperability occurs every day in our line of work. Fire fighters, police officers and emergency personnel work closely with each other on nearly all emergencies and they need to know that their communications systems will not fail them when

they need it the most. With that being said, we in the public safety communications industry are well aware of the limitations there are in establishing an interoperable communications system.

Unfortunately, some believe that such a system can be developed from a top down model, where the federal government identifies the solutions to interoperability and mandates these solutions to the local communities. I am here to tell you that this will not work. Emergencies happen at the local level. The first responders that are on the scene minutes after the incident has occurred are the local police, fire and emergency personal. The first 9-1-1 calls come in to the local public safety answering points and the first emergency personnel are dispatched from local emergency communications centers. Many times State and Federal assistance does not arrive until hours and sometimes days later. Most often the communications problems that occurred at the time of the incident have been fixed by the time State and Federal assistance is on the scene.

So what is needed? What can the Federal government do that is not already being done by local governments? How can the Federal government assist local governments to establish interoperable communications systems?

The answer involves planning, resources, funding and training. The solutions are very complex and many times very expensive. APCO's Homeland Security Task Force concluded that the following six broad topics encompass most of the needs identified following the tragic events of September 11th:

- **Planning:** establishing concise and mutually agreed upon methodology to respond to natural disasters and large scale terrorist actions that include chemical, biological and or nuclear threats.
- **Interoperability:** the ability of different government agencies or first responders (law enforcement, EMS, fire fighters) to communicate within and across departmental jurisdictional boundaries.
- **Radio Spectrum:** having sufficient spectrum for unfettered and high-quality reliable communications in emergency situations.
- **Survivability/Redundancy:** knowing how to plan and having the funding available to build public safety communications systems and communication centers that can withstand a terrorist attack or other significant manmade and natural threats.
- **Security:** instigating processes and procedures to assure that public safety communications systems, centers and staff are protected with substantially increased security to thwart attempts by enemies of the United States to disrupt and destroy our emergency communication capability.
- **Personnel/Training:** providing the necessary training to public safety communications personnel to enable them to plan for any type of terrorist event, to utilize new technology, to be aware of new security systems and procedures, and to deal with the stresses associated with working in an environment characterized by perpetual anticipation.

After the events of September 11th, many communication centers moved quickly to update their emergency response plans, both at the agency and regional level. They found that those emergency management programs that had been on hold or scheduled for long-term development were now pushed to the top of the priority list. The pressure was on to assure the public that public safety communicators were prepared to answer the call in any situation – regardless of how remote a possibility. At the same time, elected officials wanted assurances that their communication centers could handle responding to new threats.

The federal government should be closely involved in assisting local communities to develop regional interoperability plans. The process needs to include many of the key personnel that would respond to a catastrophic event, which might include local police, fire, and emergency personnel as well as state and federal officials. It is without a doubt the best people to establish a regional interoperable plan are the local emergency personnel. They know their citizens, terrain, and resources. For example, I chair the New York Metropolitan Advisory Committee (NYMAC) which helps to coordinate the communications needs of the many public safety agencies serving New York City and nearby areas. Just last week, the NYMAC held a meeting with other regional emergency coordinators from New York and New Jersey. The purpose of the meeting was to identify procedures to follow for emergency communications during the Republican National Convention that may require mutual aid from the surrounding police, fire or EMS jurisdictions. Many APCO members are involved in similar regional efforts across the country on a on going basis.

Without adequate planning there can be little interoperability. APCO's Homeland Security Task Force identified three levels of interoperability planning.

- Day-to-day interoperability covers routine public safety operations, such as responding to a building fire that requires backup from a neighboring fire department, or a vehicle chase that crosses between towns.
- Mutual aid interoperability supports a joint and immediate response to catastrophic accidents, large scale incidents and natural disasters. It supports tactical communications in response to airplane crashes, bombings, forest fires, earthquakes, hurricanes and similar events that occur without warning.
- Task force interoperability supports local, state, and federal agencies collaborating for an extended period of time to address a particular problem. For example, a task force might lead extended recovery operations, provide security for major events, or respond to prolonged criminal activity. These are activities that are planned in advance.

However, planning is not enough. Public safety needs the resources to accomplish the goals they identify in the planning process. One of the scarcest resources that are needed by public safety is spectrum. Today APCO International is also testifying at the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation committee hearing on one of the critical recommendations of the 9/11 Commission that Congress adopt pending legislation to clear broadcast stations from the 700 MHz band, portions of which have already been reallocated for public safety. APCO supports the HERO Act (H.R. 1425) introduced by Representatives Jane Harman and Curt Weldon in March 2003, establishing January 1, 2007, as a date certain for the clearing of these channels by the broadcasters. The passage of this act or a similar act is long overdue. The

ability of public safety to use this spectrum will go along way in establishing new and enhancing existing interoperable communications systems.

Many communities lack the spectrum required to establish an interoperable radio communications system. For example, without excess channel capacity, regional public safety agencies cannot dedicate sufficient channels for mutual aid or interoperability. Moreover, the lack of available radio spectrum has forced public safety agencies to operate in multiple, incompatible portions of the radio spectrum. With sufficient channel capacity, agencies within the same region could migrate to a spectrum efficient wide-area system operating in single frequency band.

As an example of the diverse spectrum use that now exists, the Suffolk County Police Department operates on 800 MHz band frequencies while fire, EMS, and some local police departments within the County's borders operate on either VHF (150-170 MHz) or UHF (450-512 MHz) band frequencies. Similar variations occur in neighboring Nassau County, and within New York City. The agencies in question are working hard to find ways to interoperate as best they can, but the lack of radio spectrum is a major hindrance. There are not even enough channels to create a cross-band patch, let alone sufficient spectrum for a wide-area, multi-agency system in a single frequency band. This is a common problem in many areas of the country.

Apart from interoperability, the lack of sufficient radio spectrum also limits internal communications capability for many public safety agencies. In many areas, existing channels are overcrowded just with internal communication, without even considering the need for "external"

interoperability. Many agencies are also unable to implement new state-of-the-art communication tools within existing, inadequate radio spectrum allocations.

Another resource that is greatly needed in establishing an interoperable communications system is funding. Many communities lack the funds needed to upgrade their current systems to new technological advances in communications equipment. After the planning process local communities need to be able to fund the programs and equipment that are identified in their plans. If there is not enough funding the best plans may never get implemented. However, funding can not be limited to one size fits all solutions. Several times we have been asked, what would be the cost of establishing a national interoperable communications system. We don't know. Each community has different needs and different funding sources to meet those needs. However, we do know that federal assistance is needed in funding many of the interoperable plans around the country. However, this assistance should not be tied a national model.

Tied closely to funding is the lack of new technologically advanced communications equipment. This has been an ongoing issue for many public safety communicators. At a time of national threat, technology that has been solely created for government use should be shared among the nations' first responders. Funding to pursue new technologies like software-defined radios should be provided. As part of their ongoing planning, public safety communicators should identify and reach out to known research centers and labs for information on the newest technology. Incompatible radio equipment from different vendors can also be a problem, especially in a digital environment. APCO anticipated this issue back in late 1980's, when it initiated Project 25 to establish user-driven, public safety digital interoperability standards. Those standards are now in use at the federal, state, and local levels, with digital, interoperable

Project 25 compatible radio equipment available from multiple vendors. Project 25 continues to refine and adapt standards to reflect improvement in technology and spectrum efficiency. Long term, technologies such as software defined radios may take interoperable equipment a step further, and APCO has been involved in that process through the National Public Safety Telecommunications Council.

I would like to conclude my testimony by impressing the need for training of public safety personnel. Some of the most important training that needs to occur to prepare public safety communicators for Homeland Security starts with the dispatchers and call-takers. It is critical that these individuals receive training in critical analysis of information to be able to spot an escalating incident. Dispatchers need additional information since they might be put in the role of helping to locate triage and evacuation areas.

To recap, what can the federal government do that is not already being done by the local governments and how can the federal government assist local governments in establishing interoperable communications systems? In short, the Department of Homeland Security SAFECOM Program should be given discretion to fund and promote a variety of interoperability approaches that meet specific local requirements.

On behalf of APCO International, I want to thank you once again for conducting this hearing and for allowing me to submit my testimony today. APCO looks forward to working with Congress to ensure that public safety agencies have the resources necessary to fulfill their obligation to protect the safety of life, health, and property.