

Committee on Energy and Commerce

Opening Statement

of

Subcommittee on Communications and Technology Ranking Member Mike Doyle

Solutions to Strengthen U.S. Public Safety Communications

September 26, 2018

Thank you, Madam Chairman, for holding this hearing, and thank you to the witnesses for your testimony today.

Public safety communications and the integrity of our 9-1-1 system is of paramount importance to our nation.

Ensuring that lifesaving aid gets to those in need in time often comes down to a fast, well-coordinated response by local first responders, something our witnesses deal with every day. This process often starts when a person in need picks up their phone to call for help.

This subcommittee is examining three pieces of legislation today.

Mr. Lance and Ms. Eshoo have introduced legislation regarding 9-1-1 fee diversion. This is a practice where a small number of states divert fees intended to fund and upgrade 9-1-1 call centers to other non-related public safety programs. This bill seeks to further direct and clarify the FCC's efforts to investigate and report on this practice.

The second piece of legislation was introduced by Mr. Engel and Mr. Kinzinger regarding Swatting, a malicious and deadly practice, where individuals use weaknesses in the phone network to conceal their identity and report a false event that warrants a large-scale police response. Such incidents require full-scale responses that take time and money away from departments tasked with protecting the public.

Like many here, I've read too many stories of how these incidents can go bad as well, with SWAT teams being prepared to deal with extremely dangerous situations only to come across confused and frightened individuals who have been targeted by these Swatting attacks.

Too many times, innocent people have lost their lives because of these malicious, deceptive calls. Our colleague Congresswoman Clark has herself been a victim of Swatting.

I'm happy to once again support my colleague Mr. Engel's bill, to rein in this dangerous practice. This bill was voice voted out of Committee last Congress, and I hope that we can do so again.

I hope as the Committee examines this issue, that we continue our due diligence. Increasing the penalties for this offence are important, but we need to strengthen our

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telecommunications systems to ensure that the people calling 911 - and to be honest, calling all of us - are who they say they are. Every day I get calls from fake numbers claiming to come from my neighborhood. We can not ultimately curb Swatting until our phone systems can do a better job at identifying and blocking fake numbers.

I would urge the majority and the chairman to keep this in mind, if they hope to address this underlying issue.

Finally, we are looking at a bill introduced by Ms. Brooks and Ms. Eshoo regarding the establishment of a national non-emergency short dialing code. In Pittsburgh, like many cities, 3-1-1 is that number. Residents in Pittsburgh can use it to report a downed tree, a building code violation, or all too often a pothole on a city street.

This service gives residents a valuable line to city and municipal agencies where they can report important but non-emergency incidents.

Properly implemented, this service can reduce the burden on 9-1-1 operators and call centers, allowing them to focus more fully on responding to real emergency situations.

I hope that we can advance this legislation as well.

While I think these bills should be able to move in our Committee, I am very concerned that this hearing is titled "Solutions to Strengthen U.S. Public Safety Communications."

Neither these bills nor the Committee's other efforts have gone far enough to address many of the underlying challenges facing this sector. As the witnesses point out, Public Safety agencies need a strong federal partner to ensure that they have the technology and solutions deployed to meet the needs of our country.

I'd like to submit for the record an article from the New York Times Magazine that was published last month regarding one family's horrific experience in Houston during Hurricane Harvey. The family couldn't get a medivac via 9-1-1, and so they resorted to calling their Congressman, Gene Green, where an intern answered the phone and helped direct a helicopter rescue.

The 9-1-1 system was clearly overwhelmed - and was not nearly robust or resilient enough to tackle the volume of calls or the multiple storm-related equipment and facility failures that occurred.

And that none of this is in anyway intended to diminish the brave and courageous efforts of so many volunteers who came to their neighbors' aid in this disaster and so many others. But for the richest most powerful nation on earth, we can and should do better.

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