



**Testimony of Leesa Berens Morrison  
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**U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Homeland Security**

**Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness,  
and Response**

**“Challenges Facing First Responders in Border Communities”**

Chairman Cuellar, Ranking Member Dent and Committee Members.

My name is Leesa Berens Morrison and I serve as Homeland Security Director for the State of Arizona and chair of the National Governors Association's Border Security Committee, part of NGA's Governor's Homeland Security Advisory Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

I commend you for calling this hearing on such an important and timely subject, and for working to seek solutions to the challenges faced by border-based first responders. I also would like to commend Chairman Cuellar on calling for the creation of a Border Liaison at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to improve relationships and communications on both sides of our border, as well as a comprehensive study to determine the infrastructure, staffing and resources needed at our borders. I applaud your commitment to improving border security, and the Committee as a whole for taking the time to convene today.

As I begin my testimony, I would be remiss if I did not point out something that, although obvious, is important to keep in mind. Arizona's southern border is not just my state's border. It is our nation's border to another country and, in many ways, to the outside world. In our post-September 11 world, that means a broken and malfunctioning border represents no less than a national security crisis in the United States. The first responders at the border are men and women who work every day to try to keep our citizens safe and secure. They understand this reality and operate with that sense of urgency. I believe our policy-makers at the state level and federal level owe them the same sense of focus and urgency.

I would like to focus my remarks on two of the most troublesome challenges faced by first responders in border communities. The first is the porous, unsecured international border. As the state that experiences the majority of the nation's illegal border crossings, Arizona offers real-world perspective on the implications that an unsecured border has on emergency response. The second challenge is a nation that lacks a comprehensive, interoperable emergency communications system, the absence of which makes it both dangerous and difficult for first responders to protect and save lives. In Arizona we do not have to theorize about what our communications needs would be in an emergency situation – our first responders on the border operate under these conditions every day.

### **The Challenges of a Porous Border**

More than a million illegal crossers have been apprehended along the 377-mile Arizona-Mexico border over the last two years. The repercussions of so much illegal cross-border traffic include increased border violence, criminal activity, incarcerations, investigations and autopsies, all of which place an undue and unsustainable staffing and funding burden on the first responders who work in this region. Through no choice of our own, Arizona's first responders have also become, in many ways, de-facto Border Patrol agents and immigration police. This places an enormous strain on our first responders, not to mention the overall security of our state.

As you consider the unique burdens on first responders in border states, it is also critical to keep in mind that our southern border is, for vast stretches, comprised of the desert. In many ways, the crises our border-based first responders handle on a daily basis are the result of the harsh environment in which they work. Firstly, Arizona emergency responders along the border must be specially-trained to work and function safely in very remote areas with extreme heat and weather conditions, much like the special training provided to the National Guard who reported to the southern border as part of Operation Jumpstart. This alone represents a unique cost for first responders that states like ours must bear.

But the much greater burden is that many of the emergencies we respond to every day are immigration-related crises caused by the extreme conditions in the desert. Each year first responders find hundreds of bodies in the Arizonan desert. These were people attempting to cross into the United States, but who succumbed to heat, dehydration and other common problems associated with the conditions of our region. In addition to being a tragic loss of life, each one of these deaths also presents great cost of money and manpower to the State of Arizona and to the Native American nations along the border. Recovery, investigations, autopsies and burial costs all must be borne by our law enforcement agencies and first responders.

For every one of the deaths that occur during attempted border crossings, our first responders handle many more rescue operations. Putting aside the problems with our broken border and outdated immigration laws, first responders have an obligation to save lives, and along the border they meet that obligation many times every day.

These life-saving emergency responses along our border every year takes not only an economic toll on our border communities but it is also an enormous drain on the emergency response system we have put in place to deal with natural disasters and homeland security crises.

However, sitting by idly awaiting federal action to address the cause of these strains – the open border – is not an option. To help fill this dire security gap in our state, Arizona has:

- Dissuaded illegal crossers through increased local law enforcement patrols along the border, paid for with state funding that was freed up when Governor Napolitano declared a state of emergency in Arizona's border counties;
- Decreased border-related crime through Arizona anti-gang squads - Gang Intelligence and Immigration Team Enforcement Missions (GIITEMs) – which include local law enforcement from border communities;
- Dismantled manufacturers and vendors of the fake IDs that are used to facilitate violent human trafficking and other crimes associated with illegal immigration, through the Governor's Fraudulent ID Task Force, comprised of local and state law enforcement;
- Cracked down on border region auto theft through Arizona's Stolen Vehicle Border Enforcement Strategy, through which local and state law enforcement use high-tech cameras to identify stolen vehicles as they travel southbound to the Mexico border;
- Formed intelligence-sharing partnerships with our neighboring border states of California, New Mexico and Texas and expanded the work of the Arizona Counter Terrorism Information Center to encompass local law enforcement officers from the border counties.

I am proud of the successes our border first responders, primarily law enforcement, have had in addressing these additional challenges. However, it would be shortsighted to focus too much on these temporary measures because these efforts divert first responders from their regular duties within their communities. The real solution to the border crisis can only be found at the federal level. I am here today to ask for your assistance so that our first responders can focus their efforts on their primary duties in their local communities instead of fulfilling, what we believe to be, a federal responsibility at our borders.

### **Interoperability Challenges**

A second significant challenge facing first responders along the border is a lack of a comprehensive, coordinated system of interoperable communications. Because of our broken border, first responders working in the region are in a constant state of emergency response, making it even more challenging to operate when communications among first responders is hindered. And after our many months and years in this situation, it is clear that the interoperability of our emergency communications systems is still inadequate.

With no comprehensive long-term federal solution to the communications vacuum in sight, states have applied a “band-aid” approach that works only during emergency response. In Arizona, we have spent precious homeland security funding to provide for interoperability along the border and throughout the state on a short term basis, including:

- Building patching technologies, upgrading radio towers and purchasing Mobile Communications Vans that allow Arizona first responders to communicate with one another during emergency response efforts. Just last year Arizona opened an additional two regional communications hubs in Santa Cruz County to further enhance border interoperability during emergencies;
- Developing a mutual aid agreement with Sonora to share response equipment that provide secure radio communications among law enforcement and response agencies working along the border;
- Creating a Collaborative Border Regional Alliance to develop cooperative relationships among the disparate communications service providers supporting the Arizona/Sonora region;
- Holding bi-national exercises involving hundreds of Arizona and Mexican firefighters, medical responders and law enforcement officers who work along the border to test cross-border interoperability.

I can give you hundreds of examples of how these interim measures have assisted our first responders’ communications capabilities during emergency responses along our border. But, I reiterate that these temporary measures are no substitute for comprehensive action at the federal level to upgrade our nation’s public safety communications systems and achieve fixed, permanently-installed infrastructure for real-time, on-demand interoperability, supported by 700/800 MHz, trunked and P25 compliant radios. We need a long-term solution to this ongoing problem, and federal dollars to implement the solution. For all of our safety, we owe our first responders the ability to communicate with one another during all emergency response efforts, not just large-scale events. And since emergencies do not stop

at international borders, I ask that Congress take into consideration the additional need for cross-border communications.

Arizona also encourages any federal effort to provide states with a distinct and separate funding stream for interoperability efforts, such as the Department of Commerce's interoperability grant program.

### **Funding Shortfalls**

The simple fact is that state and local response efforts depend to a large degree on federal homeland security funding, and although these funds have decreased over recent years the challenges to first responders, especially in border communities have continued to grow. First responders will always be the first people we turn to, whether it's a terrorist attack or a national disaster. We trust these firefighters, law enforcement officers and emergency medical personnel to save our lives. In return, they trust us to ensure that they have the resources they needs to keep us safe and our nation secure. And at the border our first responders need specific cross-border pandemic plans, unique critical infrastructure protection and bi-national preparedness and training systems. I believe all of this should all be given due consideration when federal homeland security funding allotments are determined. We will continue to do all we can in Arizona to address these challenges, but resources are scarce and stretched too thin.

### **Closing**

In closing, I ask that Congress continue to give attention to the unique challenges that border first responders face every day, and to apply the necessary funding and federal solutions to these challenges, for the sake of homeland security and the safety of our citizens.

Since 9/11 first responders have been asked to do more for their communities than ever before. In addition to their everyday heroic efforts while walking beats, suppressing fires, conducting search and rescue and hazardous materials response and providing emergency medical care, first responders today are constantly on the lookout for terrorist activity. And first responders working in border communities bear the additional responsibilities that must be acknowledged and addressed.

I appreciate your time and consideration, and am pleased to answer any questions you have at this time.