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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

Resilient Communications: Current Challenges and Future Advancements

September 12, 2012 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Resilient Communications: Current Challenges and Future Advancements”:

“The September 11th tragedy and Hurricane Katrina taught us that interoperable communications are essential during a disaster. Those catastrophic events taught us that lives can be saved if first responders are able to communicate with each other.

Few questioned the need to provide Federal grant funding to enable state and local governments to achieve interoperability. Over the last decade, the nation has invested \$13 billion toward the goal of creating a resilient, interoperable communications infrastructure.

Our efforts to create that infrastructure have met with some success in improving the ability of first responders and public safety personnel to communicate with each other. However, as every parent knows, ability does not always lead to achievement.

While funding has assured the availability of the tools, we must now move forward by making sure that the policies, procedures and formal linkages are in place to achieve success.

Our next steps must involve the effective coordination among Federal, State, and local stakeholders in reviewing emergency communications failures and developing requirements and standards for advanced public safety communications systems. Without coordination, our first responders will not be able to keep pace as the technology changes the means of communication.

As a practical example, we know that most people under 30 do not talk on the phone--they text. Text messages and video voicemail are now standard communication methods. Yet few emergency response systems are able to receive those kinds of communications.

We cannot allow disaster response efforts to be hampered because Federal, state and local governments are unable to reach the necessary agreements to advance public safety communications systems.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, building a fully interoperable public safety communications network can be achieved. It will require collaboration and coordination. I hope that all the parties—public and private sector—are ready for the challenge.”

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