

FCC Independent Panel to Reviewing the Impact  
of  
Hurricane Katrina on Communications Networks

Mr. Chairman, My name is Edmund M. ATed@ Sexton Sexton, Sr., the Sheriff of Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, and the President of the National Sheriffs= Association.

It is indeed an honor and privileged to serve on this Commission with such a broad variety of experts that have been assembled here today. Our charge is of dire importance to the response of future disasters. I hope that my seven weeks of first hand experience assisting sheriffs with recovery efforts, and experiencing many of issues we are here to discuss with both Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, will benefit this commission.

Katrina was a very naughty girl, and there are many lessons to be learned from her. When the next catastrophe strikes, the next response must be demonstrably better. America will accept nothing less. Our actions in the next major disaster will reveal to the world the lessons that we as a nation learned, or failed to learn, from Hurricane Katrina. It is not just our reputation at stake. There is little doubt that

terrorist organizations are studying our response to Katrina, while seeking to identify every weakness revealed by intense media coverage, for future exploitation. We must be ready.

Shortly after hurricane Katrina had passed, I had a brief conversation with a Sheriff in Louisiana who described the total devastation and resulting lawlessness caused by the storm, before losing him due to limited and overwhelmed cellular telephone service. Shortly after that, I had another conversation with a Sheriff in Mississippi on a regional digital two-way utility radio system that was not affected by the hurricane, and was able to find out the immediate need for additional law enforcement personnel. While my home state of Alabama had been affected, the few communication systems that were down had a mechanism for redundancy including the same regional digital two-way utility radio system used to contact the Sheriff in the neighboring state of Mississippi.

Recognizing the immediate need for a potentially large law enforcement response, the National Sheriffs=

Association began to organize a response from within our membership of sheriffs and their deputies across the nation. Our response used resources under the established guidelines of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). Approximately one thousand five hundred deputies responded to Mississippi and Louisiana as a result of the call for assistance.

Everyone associated with Public Safety has an understanding of what went wrong with their communications systems during the Hurricane. The systems which failed ranged from primary radio systems, back-up radio systems, cell phones, E-911, and Computer Aided Dispatch centers, to jail communication systems. These failures were experienced by not only governmental agencies, but the public at large in the wake of a storm with a path that was approximately the size of the State of Tennessee. These communication failures need to be addressed, but the central issue of concern to the public safety sector is the challenge of communication interoperability and redundancy that has been previously identified in other disasters.

The definition of interoperability is the ability

for one agency to be able to communicate with another. While there are many levels of technology that will achieve interoperability, in many cases they failed to demonstrate their ability to successfully operate. Experience showed that many agencies do not have the available interoperable frequencies programmed into their agency radios. Arguments still exist in many states as to the best way to build and pay for such systems. In many cases, the system costs are driven by standards. It is not clear that these standards, approved in the late 1980=s, consider technologies that are now available.

The central interoperability communications issues, seen repeatedly, were communication system redundancy and frequency resources. The need for updated training and complete on-site telecommunication resource inventories would have benefited all agencies involved. Interoperability is not a radio manufacturing or standards issue, because interoperable frequencies are available in all manufactured public safety radios.

In many cases there were few, if any, redundant systems for failures in primary, secondary, or commercial radios. If everyone had brought a spare portable radio,

battery and charger, limited interoperable radio communications capability could have been established. The addition of a suitcase repeater, or self sufficient communications vehicles, or ACommunications on Wheels@ vehicles, would have enhanced local communications. Tactical bridges have limited range and capabilities unless they are preprogrammed for national and regional interoperability frequencies. Redundancy capabilities should be considered beyond radios, and should include critical data information, such as criminal records, as well.

The failure of Dispatch and 911 centers was a mixture of failed or broken telephone lines, buildings with single entrances, and limited path redundancy. This was coupled with the lack of ability from tandems to pass messages by radio or cell phone. The other difficulty was that telecommunications personnel were faced with their own family needs and lack of replacement personnel.

The training of personnel for emergency operations, and the training of a corpse of replacement telecommunicators, was a real problem. The benefits of

having a corps of trained and certified telecommunicators that have the benefit of continuous operational training, was readily apparent. We need to provide continuous training for our radio technicians, and a means to obtain replacement components in an expedited fashion to maintain the operations of communications systems. A rapid response protocol or pre-positioning of equipment caches and generators to facilitate the unexpected needs or destruction of existing communications equipment needs to be established.

Additionally, the establishment of communications and dispatch center protocols for each state would aid in providing an expedited response to disasters. These protocols would allow for useable communications as well as allow for support personnel to operate with other agency centers. It would also be very useful to establish frequency inventories for each state to determine which primary and secondary responders frequencies should be programmed into local tactical bridges. Finally, the Interoperability channels should be programmed into each new radio by the manufacturer.

Radio interference almost certainly assures that not all interoperable frequencies will work in all locations, nor will organizational frequencies, but there are options of multiple interoperable frequencies.

There is no single communication system that all will agree about. This is, in my opinion, true for radio, telephone, cellular, and voice over internet protocol. The National Weather Service has called for another extremely active hurricane season, so we know that history is very likely to repeat itself, and it is a given that the nation will express its dissatisfaction at the ballot box if these problems continue to affect their quality of life and personal safety. If those in office, like me, hope to remain in office, then immediate steps must be taken.