

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****Interoperable Communications: Assessing Progress Since 9/11***

November 18, 2014 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications subcommittee hearing entitled “Interoperable Communications: Assessing Progress Since 9/11”:

“As a former volunteer firefighter, I know that operable and interoperable communications are essential to ensuring that first responders can do their jobs safely and effectively. After the September 11th attacks, however, the 9/11 Commission identified interoperable communications among our nation’s most significant vulnerabilities in disaster response.

Despite initial federal investments in the years following the attacks, interoperable communications challenges plagued the response to Hurricane Katrina, exacerbating the devastation.

In response to continued interoperability challenges realized during the storm, Congress created the Office of Emergency Communications at the Department of Homeland Security to bolster State and local capabilities to plan, coordinate, train, and evaluate interoperable communications efforts.

Since its inception, the Office of Emergency Communications has worked to help State and local governments build the governance infrastructures necessary to develop robust interoperable communications capabilities.

An essential component of that governance infrastructure are Statewide Interoperability Coordinators, or SWICs. SWICs have spearheaded efforts to develop State Communications Interoperability Plans, coordinate communications projects, and maintain governance structures.

With guidance from OEC, SWICs - together with Statewide Interoperable Governing Bodies - have built the communications teams that facilitated successful results to events from the Boston Marathon Bombings to the tornadoes in Moore, Oklahoma.

Although this progress is encouraging, I was troubled that the 2014 National Preparedness Report indicated that 1 in 7 territories identified operational communications as an area at greatest risk of decline.

Since being appointed to serve on the then-Select Committee on Homeland Security during the 108th Congress, I have made helping the nation resolve its interoperability challenges one of my top priorities.

Over a decade – and billions of dollars of investment – later, we have not yet made nationwide interoperability a reality. But we have made progress. Losing ground is not an option. In this austere budget environment, we simply cannot afford to go backward.

That is why I am pleased to support Ranking Member Payne, Jr.’s Statewide Interoperability Coordinator Enhancement Act. The SWIC Enhancement Act will ensure that States preserve the planning and coordination infrastructure that has been developed with previous Federal grant investments.

I look forward to working with Ranking Member Payne, Jr. to make sure Congress does its part to preserve the progress made toward achieving interoperability, and to ensure that the progress made is leveraged as technology evolves.

Along those lines, I am eager to learn about the progress FirstNet is making in its effort to build out the

Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network.

If executed well, the new Network has the potential to resolve challenges that have undermined previous interoperability efforts – while being flexible enough to integrate new technologies.

I understand that FirstNet has completed a series of State consultations, and its recent Request for Information and Public Notice garnered significant public participation.

I am eager to learn about the State consultation process, and about the feedback to the RFI and Public Notice. In particular, I am interested to learn about feedback related to financing the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network.

With all the time, money, and resources invested into this project at the Federal, State, and local level, sustainability is key to its success. Additionally, I am interested in learning how FirstNet is coordinating with the Office of Emergency Communications to conduct outreach to State and local stakeholders.”

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FOR MORE INFORMATION: Please contact Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
H2-117, Ford House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515
Phone: (202) 226-2616 | Fax: (202) 226-4499
<http://chsdemocrats.house.gov>