REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
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Thank you. It's great to be back in New Orleans, to be with you this morning, and to be in the company of our great FCC team, led here by the Chief of our new Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, Derek Poarch. He's new to this job but not new to public safety and he's already making a mark with the energy, intelligence and good judgment he brings to his post.

So I'm pleased to be at this really important gathering this morning. I suppose every conference starts off with the speaker saying how important it is, but this is "for real important." My first job in Washington D.C.—the one I left my New Orleans job teaching at Loyola University for—was with Senator Fritz Hollings of South Carolina and he told me something right off the bat when I went to work for him that has stuck with me ever since. "The safety of the people is the first obligation of the public servant," he told me. And that came back to me again just last week as we saw the service and sacrifice of those brave firefighters in Charleston, South Carolina, who made the supreme public safety sacrifice. Public service sometimes demands a lot, and this tragedy, I hope, reminds every citizen of this country, one more time, of the debt we owe those who care so much and give so much for the benefit of us all. Our hearts go out to the firefighters' families, loved ones and colleagues.

There are a lot of dedicated public servants in this room. You serve the people of this great country and you are responsible for protecting them when disaster strikes. It's an awesome burden and an enormous challenge. But it's also a wonderful opportunity, a chance to turn your efforts towards something that can really make a difference in people's lives, even save people's lives.

I think it's great that we have folks from so many different agencies in this room together; from state, local and the federal government; and that you have been working together so hard on this challenge, including your week here at this gathering. You're going to be the front-line folks if and when another disaster strikes and it's just essential that you get to know each other *now,* and develop innovative and effective response procedures *now,* and not in the middle of a crisis.

I am also very pleased that we have so many folks from industry here as well. Protecting the public safety is a job for *everyone.* We can best do it—we can *only* do it—by working together, and I applaud those of you and your organizations that have come here to be part of this week's effort.

The fact that we're having this exercise here in New Orleans, at the beginning of hurricane season, is especially important and I think ought to be a sobering reminder to us all. I got to see the tragic remnants of Katrina again yesterday—another chance to feel the suffering that can be inflicted when our preparedness defenses are down. The causes of the disaster that

became Hurricane Katrina were many and of course went far beyond the world of communications. But it *is* also common knowledge that the failure of our communications systems played a terrible role in exacerbating all of these problems.[1] As the FCC's own Katrina Panel documented, for a week or more, more often than not, 911 calls went unanswered, broadcast stations were dark, public safety radio systems were seriously compromised, wireless phones were inoperable, and wireline phones had no dial tone.[2] As historian Douglas Brinkley puts it: "That was the consensus, the one fiasco everyone agreed on — whatever else Katrina did to New Orleans, it had clearly broken down all standard modes of communications."[3]

We need to do better. I know each of you, and each of your agencies and enterprises, has really important skills and resources to bring to the table when it comes to protecting and restoring communications infrastructure. Our common goal should be to do such a good job that communications is *not* a focus in the aftermath of the next disaster. It should be an afterthought or not a thought at all. Police and other first responders, hospital workers, nursing home staff, and concerned family members should be free to focus on their primary missions. They should not have to worry, in the middle of a crisis, about whether their communications equipment will work.

Now that the Gulf Coast has begun the arduous process of rebuilding, our task is to ensure that we are better prepared as a nation for the next disaster, whether it be another hurricane, possibly even stronger than Katrina, or some other event. Tragedy that Katrina was in so many ways, had that storm been 30 or 40 miles west, it would have been immensely more catastrophic. And as we prepare for sure-to-be future ravages from mother nature, we must accord equal attention to preparations against the violence and murder of terrorism, where many experts remind us it's not a question of whether there will be more attacks, but when. So, if we can be sure of anything, it is that there *will* be a next disaster. And if we are going to be any better prepared next time, it will be because every federal, state, and local agency commits substantial resources to disaster preparation and makes it, truly, a top priority.

While I'm here, let me briefly address one important issue that my own agency is beginning to confront and that I know many others are also grappling with. That issue is whether the government should be focusing so heavily on a best-practice, recommendation-based approach or whether we should be using our various forms of legal authority to start developing mandatory public safety requirements. I certainly applaud the many efforts that industry has undertaken and think it is important to continue the great tradition of public-private partnership that has always been especially strong when it comes to public safety. But this is a job that needs

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[1] *See, e.g.,* Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, H.R. Rep. No. 109-377, at 165 (2006), *available at* http://katrina.house.gov/full_katrina_report.htm ("The near total failure of regional communications degraded situational awareness and exacerbated problems with agency coordination, command and control, logistics, and search and rescue operations."); Ivor Van Heerden and Mike Bryan, *The Storm* (Viking 2006), at 95 ("Simply put, along with everything else during Hurricane Katrina, we had a ridiculous, tragic failure to communicate.")

[2] See Independent Panel Reviewing the Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Communications Networks, *Report and Recommendations to the Federal Communications Commission, available at* http://www.fcc.gov/eb/hkip/karrp.pdf

[3] Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge* (HarperCollins 2006), at 215.

to get accomplished, one way or the other, and if one approach is not getting us fully prepared for the next public safety incident, then we'd better be looking at other options. I say this not because I think it's a good guys-bad guys kind of thing, but in recognition of the reality that there are different dynamics and pressures that operate in our respective spheres, and if we are ever going to get this job done right we need to start by recognizing the world in which we live and work. I personally have long believed that government needs to be taking a lead role in mandating network resiliency standards. The nation's experience with 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina indicates to me that industry best practices and voluntary best efforts are not by themselves always going to get the job done.

This is one of the reasons I applaud the leadership of Chairman Martin at the FCC. Our agency recently acted to impose mandatory back-up power requirements on carriers who maintain central offices, as well as disaster planning requirements for carriers who own and operate certain facilities that are critical to the functioning of the 911 system. These reforms were based on the recommendations of the Katrina Commission—which was led by former NTIA Administrator Nancy Victory—as well as the many contributors to the public record, including the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) as well as St. Tammany Parish located just a few miles from here. While I certainly see the need for government to be careful and judicious in its use of mandatory requirements, I hope that we are on the cusp of taking a careful but more pro-active approach to guaranteeing public safety.

One other point: if Katrina taught us anything, it is that a huge number of institutions—I'm talking here about not only municipalities, but hospitals, nursing homes, charities, and small businesses of every stripe—don't always—or perhaps even usually—have the resources to come up with self-generated, custom-built and fully-tested disaster readiness plans. Why should each of these groups have to start from scratch and re-invent the public safety wheel? I think there's a deep need for government to act as a clearinghouse of ideas about what has worked for other organizations and what hasn't. First responders strapped for money should have a place to go to learn what other responders and jurisdictions and municipalities are doing. Why can't a hospital in rural Louisiana or Mississippi have somewhere to go to see what other facilities in other areas have already proposed or done to shore up their public safety communications? After all, learning that your disaster plan doesn't work in the middle of a disaster is emphatically *not* the right time to make that discovery. Think of the time, the effort, the money—even the lives—that might be saved by such clearinghouse activities. Chief Poarch is moving as we speak to develop this kind of capacity at the Commission—and I saw first-hand again yesterday how eagerly first responders welcome this initiative. It's something we should have done years ago. I commend him, and Chairman Martin, for their work to get this rolling. And I have encouraged other state, local, and federal agencies which have substantial knowledge and resources to be thinking and acting along these cooperative, information-sharing lines, too.

Finally, I want to urge everyone in this audience to be as aggressive and proactive as you can possibly be on these issues. Be imaginative—our job is to figure out the many ways that actual events can deviate from what's expected and to have an answer before that happens. We can't always be preparing for the last disaster—we need to envision new and unprecedented ones, too. It's my experience after decades in various branches of the government that many of the very best ideas bubble up from the folks closest to the action. If you see an opportunity being

missed, or an idea that needs to be implemented, you shouldn't be afraid to speak out and send it up the chain. Sometimes that's not easy, sometimes you will be boats against the current, but it can pay huge dividends, so we all need to be persistent, even dogged, in our pursuit of public safety. I know that it's an inevitable human tendency not to think about the worst case scenario or to think that, when things are going fine, we don't need to dwell on all the many ways that they can go wrong. But disaster planning is all about fighting that impulse and planning in advance for the many ways that things can—and often do—go wrong, sometimes terribly wrong.

I know you have much to do today, so let me close now and thank you for giving me these few moments to visit with you. I saw a lot yesterday and look forward to learning more today. Thank you all for what you do to protect our communities and our country. Each of you deserves the nation's gratitude for your dedication and your service, and I look forward to continuing to work together with you to meet that first obligation of the public servant that I mentioned at the outset.