

SUMMIT ON PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS
Enhancing Communications Response for Health Care and First Responders

Federal Communications Commission
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REMARKS OF COMMISSIONER ROBERT M. McDOWELL

Good morning and welcome to the FCC. I am pleased that we are hosting all of you at today's Pandemic Preparedness Summit. A special welcome to Assistant Secretary Yeskey: Thank you for joining us today to deliver opening remarks. We are grateful for your input and guidance. I also thank the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau for organizing this event. Finally, thank you to the panelists for coming in to share your knowledge and experiences with us. Chairman Martin and I started discussing the Commission's role in pandemic response about two years ago and I'm delighted to see that we've made some progress; but we have a lot more work to do.

To prepare for a pandemic, policy makers must consider not only how to manage the outbreak itself (which is where Dr. Yeskey and his colleagues have a leading role), but also how to maintain critical operations during the outbreak (which is where the Commission comes in). The effects of a pandemic will be broad, deep and simultaneous. Unlike hurricanes or other natural disasters, a pandemic would not physically damage power lines or broadcast, wireless or wireline communications networks. Yet, a pandemic would nonetheless almost certainly prevent essential personnel from spending time at the workplace for potentially lengthy periods of time. They will be too scared to go to work. A pandemic therefore has the real potential to disrupt our ability to communicate. And, as we all know, our economy rides on our communications infrastructure. Thus, our task today – to plan for an event that extends well beyond health and medical boundaries – is all the more important.

I look forward to learning more about how the Commission will assist with keeping our nation's communications networks going in order to sustain public safety operations and key economic activities, as well as disseminate critical health and security information to our citizens. For instance, will networks be able to support a surge of telecommuting employees? Will broadcasters have the means to remain on the air for lengthy periods without full staffing, or maybe no staffing at all? How will new technologies enhance our communications abilities?

Managing in a pandemic – with considerable loss of staff, depleted resources, a potentially struggling economy, and a nervous public – will be a meaningful challenge. Moreover, the evolving nature of the threat means the planning process needs to be iterative and refined as new information becomes available. Given that need, I hope the Commission will continue to play an important role, and that today's summit will be the first of many to follow.

Again, thank you. And best of luck for a successful day. Now let's get to work.