

**Opening Statement of Commissioner Ajit Pai
at the FCC Field Hearing on Superstorm Sandy**

New York City, New York

February 5, 2013

Today's events are about listening and learning. Through this field hearing, as well as others to come, I hope that we will gain a richer understanding of the steps we can take to improve the performance of our communications networks and to facilitate the timely transmission of critical information during natural disasters. Chairman Genachowski, thank you for holding today's hearing.

There is much for us to learn. Our first job is to figure out what happened during and after Superstorm Sandy. How did people communicate with each other? Did they use wireline networks or wireless phones? How did they receive information about the storm? Were callers able to reach emergency services, and if not, why not? Were emergency personnel able to communicate with each other? Which communications networks worked? Which did not, and why? Did copper lines weather the storm best? Did coaxial cable? Did fiber? Did wires attached to poles perform better or worse than those buried in conduits? After the storm, how did repair efforts proceed? How quickly were networks restored?

Once we've determined what happened, we then must take the lessons learned and look to the future. Of course, there are some things that we already know. For one, we know that improving the resilience of communications networks should be one of our major goals moving forward. Americans, particularly those in New York City, are intimately familiar with the slogan "too big to fail." Well, simply put, our communications networks are too *important* to fail. That is especially true during natural disasters because the ability to communicate may be a matter of life and death. So we must examine what can be done to improve these networks in order to minimize disruptions when disaster strikes again, as it inevitably will.

We also know that reliable power is essential to communications during public safety emergencies. Unfortunately, during Sandy persistent and widespread power outages affected several communications networks. At one point, about one-quarter of cell sites across ten states were out of commission, and a substantial portion of these outages resulted from the loss of power. Back-up power can prevent networks from failing. But flooding will ruin even the sturdiest diesel generator. Large stockpiles of fuel in urban areas may not be practical. And even the best battery or largest fuel tank will eventually give out. So we also need to ask what steps we can take to avoid power outages in the first place and to bring our communications networks back on the grid sooner rather than later.

To do that, we may need to bridge the communication gap between utilities and network operators. In Sandy's aftermath, for example, I have heard complaints that local power companies would not coordinate with network operators. If this is true, it has to change. These companies share poles and conduits with each other, and a coordinated response to service restoration can bring all networks back online more quickly and efficiently. Disjointed service repair efforts only prolong the time that customers are left in the dark or cut off from communications. And utilities and communications companies need to start planning for the next disaster now, looking at ways to harden their networks to avoid future outages.

Another thing we know is that new, Internet Protocol-based technologies can make communications more reliable for the public during an emergency. Traditional 911 services, while immensely valuable, rely on older copper networks and selective routers to connect the public with emergency personnel and to collect the information they need. Just last week, I visited a public safety answering point in Virginia and heard firsthand how a single point of failure took down their operations last summer. That's unacceptable.

When the IP transition comes to emergency services, when we start deploying Next Generation 911, all of this will change. In Pike County, Pennsylvania, a short trip from New York City, 911 dispatch moved into a state-of-the-art facility late last year. Eighteen days later, Hurricane Sandy struck. But Pike County 911 reported that the new system held up extraordinarily well. No outages occurred at the 911 center—even though Pike County was without power for almost a week.

One major reason is that Pike County, like other next-generation facilities, employs fail-safes to ensure that emergency services keep running. Fiber links the two Pike County facilities, allowing one center to take over for the other in the event of an outage or to handle overflow in mass call events. Mark Fletcher, an expert on Next Generation 911 services, recently pointed out that if you call 911 during a mass call event, you usually get a busy signal, but if you hang up the phone and call your airline to check on your flight, you're going to get through. That's because the airline industry, among others, already is taking advantage of technology that routes calls to the call center with availability, not just the closest one. We need these kinds of next generation systems—systems that enable not just new technology but enhanced coordination and cooperation among public safety officials—across the country to ensure quick and effective emergency response. That's why upgrading our emergency systems to Next Generation 911 should be a top priority.

Yet another thing we know is that our citizens may not need to contact emergency personnel if they receive timely, thorough information over the airwaves. I look forward to hearing from broadcasters and others today about their efforts to keep the public safe and informed during the storm. For example, Governor Chris Christie took to the airwaves on New Jersey 101.5's "Ask the Governor" show to provide information and field questions from listeners just as Sandy was making landfall. I am eager to hear about the efforts of other broadcasters and local news teams during and after the storm.

Finally, we know that the emergency personnel and service staff who worked the ground during Sandy deserve our continuing thanks. We rely so heavily on all of you for the thousands of thankless tasks you do every day. And when things got tough, you made the sacrifice. I was especially touched by the story of NYPD Officer Artur Kasprzak who was killed during Sandy while escorting seven members of his family to safety in Staten Island. My humble thanks go out to Officer Kasprzak and to all of our emergency personnel for their service.

In closing, I look forward to listening and learning today. The witnesses we will hear from will help ensure that the Federal Communications Commission both understands the problems caused by Superstorm Sandy and has the information it needs to move forward. Thank you for coming, and I look forward to your testimony.