

**REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER AJIT PAI
AT THE NEBRASKA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION'S
PUBLIC WORKSHOP ON ACCESSING 911 SERVICE
FROM MULTI-LINE TELEPHONE SYSTEMS**

NEBRASKA INNOVATION CAMPUS, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

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I want to thank the Nebraska Public Service Commission for hosting today's workshop on accessing 911 service from multi-line telephone systems (MLTS). And I want to commend the PSC for examining the status of direct 911 calling in the Cornhusker State and promoting public awareness of this important public safety issue. State and local authorities play a lead role in overseeing the 911 system in this country, and I appreciate the work that you do, especially on this issue.

It bears observing that our nation's 911 system has been a tremendous success story. And much of that success is due to the simplicity and uniformity of that three-digit number. I've come to appreciate it all the more since traveling abroad. During a visit to India last year, for instance, I learned that there are multiple three- and four-digit numbers used for emergency calling. There's a different number depending on who you are—a senior citizen, a child—and why you're calling—traffic accident, fire, and so on. By comparison, we are very, very fortunate to have a single number, so deeply embedded in our culture.

But our system isn't perfect. In particular, when your life or the life of a loved one is on the line, you shouldn't have to think about whether you need to dial a "9", "8", "7," or some other access code to get an outside line. You should be able to dial 911 and reach first responders who can assist you in your time of need. Dialing 911 must always work.

Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. The story of Kari Rene Hunt Dunn is a tragic case in point. Nineteen months ago, Kari was stabbed to death by her estranged husband in a Marshall, Texas hotel room. During the attack, Kari's nine-year-old daughter did exactly what she had been taught to do. She tried to save her mother by dialing 911. But the call didn't go through. So she tried dialing 911 again, and again, and again—each time, the same result. She was never able to reach anyone who could help because the hotel's phone system required her to first use an access code—a "9"—before dialing 911.

Kari's daughter behaved heroically under horrific circumstances. But the hotel's phone system failed her, her mother, and her entire family.

Confronted with a tragedy like this, many people would have retreated into grief. And no one would fault them for that. But Kari's father, Hank Hunt, chose another path. He didn't want anyone else to suffer the way that his family had suffered. So he began a movement to raise awareness and to effect positive change.

After hearing his story, I had the privilege to speak with Hank. I gave him my personal commitment that I would do my best to ensure that no one would ever again confront that situation. Countless others—including Mark Fletcher—did the same thing.

So we all followed Hank's heroic lead. We rolled up our sleeves and sought to ensure that dialing 911 always works.

The small part I played was launching an inquiry to determine the scope of the problem and to encourage hotels, motels, and other buildings that use MLTS to ensure that direct 911 calling works. I asked many of the same questions that the Nebraska PSC is exploring. The responses showed that

virtually every MLTS system in use today can be configured or re-configured to allow direct 911 dialing. They revealed that modifying existing systems costs little to no money. And they made clear that many telephone systems can be configured to permit both 911 and 9-911 calling. The biggest obstacle to solving the problem was a lack of awareness—something you are helping to combat today.

Earlier this year, I had the chance to visit Marshall, Texas and the 911 dispatch center where the call from Kari's daughter would have—and should have—gone. I was honored to stand with Hank—someone whose courage, fortitude, and determination is humbling and inspiring. And I was pleased to report on the progress that's been made towards fixing this problem in just one year's time.¹

That progress has been substantial. Simply by raising awareness, we are now on track to have solved this problem by the end of the year at 24 major hotel chains nationwide, from Radisson to the Ritz-Carlton. That's real improvement that keeps people safer, and I want to thank the American Hotel & Lodging Association once again for the help they've provided in making that happen.

Manufacturers and vendors of MLTS have also stepped up to the plate. Today, half of surveyed vendors ship all of their MLTS products with a default setting of direct 911 dialing, and all of them recommend that their products be set up to allow for direct 911 dialing.

And to be clear, the federal government isn't alone in this cause. State and local governments around the country are taking the initiative, too. Illinois, Maryland, Texas, and Suffolk County, New York have all passed legislation requiring direct 911 dialing.

And yet—there's more to do. As we've learned, direct dial 911 is not just an issue in hotels and motels. It affects the schools where our children learn, the offices where Americans work, and many other buildings that use MLTS.

Take the headquarters of the Federal Communications Commission in Washington, where I work. When I started my inquiry, anyone who dialed 911 in the FCC's headquarters didn't hear "911, where is your emergency," but instead "Your call cannot be completed as dialed. Please consult your directory and call again or ask your operator for assistance. This is a recording." I didn't think this was acceptable. Neither did Congress, including Congresswoman Anna Eshoo and Congressman John Shimkus, a bipartisan team that urged the FCC to lead by example on this issue. I am pleased to say that, starting at the beginning of this month, direct dial 911 is available in our building. In fact, callers can dial both 911 and 9-911 and reach emergency services. I hope that others in government follow the FCC's example.

Speaking of 911 calling from federal buildings, we should have more data on the capabilities of MLTS devices in federal office buildings. But we don't. In 2012, Congress required the General Services Administration (GSA) to complete a report on 911 dialing from all federal buildings. The legislation specifically required GSA to "issue a report to Congress identifying the 9-1-1 capabilities of the multi-line telephone system in use by all federal agencies in all Federal buildings and properties" no later than November 18, 2012. This report could provide valuable information that could assist Nebraska or other jurisdictions looking at this issue.

We're now almost 1,000 days beyond the due date set by Congress, but GSA has not produced that report. I wrote GSA a letter back in March to get a status update, and they've recently informed me that they are finalizing one. When it does come out, I hope it provides further motivation for government officials across the country to enable direct 911 calling in government buildings.

¹ See Remarks of FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai on Connecting Americans to Emergency Personnel Whenever They Dial 911 (Jan. 23, 2015), <http://go.usa.gov/SQ5k>; see also Summary of FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai's Report on the Progress Being Made to Ensure that Dialing 911 Always Works (Jan. 23, 2015), <http://go.usa.gov/SQ5P>.

But overall, I think the tide is turning on this issue. Thanks to the work of Hank Hunt, the Nebraska PSC, and many others, we're getting closer to the day when anyone who calls 911 will reach someone who can help.

Thank you again for hosting today's workshop and raising awareness. This event, and your efforts, epitomize the meaning of "public service." I look forward to seeing the results of your proceeding.