

Federal Communications Commission

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AT&T Mobility March 8th 911 Outage

Remarks of Lisa M. Fowlkes

Acting Chief, Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Commissioners.

As you know, one of the FCC's fundamental responsibilities is to promote the safety of life and property through wire and radio communication. Central to this mission is ensuring reliable 911 service. And, simply put, the public expects and deserves calls to 911 – perhaps the most important phone call you will ever make in your life – to go through.

That is why, two weeks ago, when AT&T Mobility outages affected 911 service across the country, Chairman Pai immediately directed the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau to conduct an investigation into the root causes of the outages and their impact. Today we present you with a status update based on our preliminary inquiry, including meetings with AT&T Mobility, public safety officials and other stakeholders. Please note that our understanding of the circumstances surrounding the outages is only preliminary, and this analysis may change as our investigation continues and our understanding of the facts evolves.

On March 8th, 2017 an outage affected users of AT&T Mobility's Voice over LTE (VoLTE) 911 service. VoLTE is the technology used to transmit voice calls over a carrier's 4G LTE network. According to AT&T, on a normal day, it would expect its total VoLTE 911 call volume to be approximately 44,000 calls nationwide. During the event, approximately 12,600 unique callers were not able to reach 911 directly, although a small subset of these calls were answered by a backup call center and routed to first responders. The outage appears to have affected VoLTE 911 calls for approximately 5 hours in the Southeast, Central US and portions of the Northeast Region of the US, and eventually affected a significant portion of VoLTE 911 calls in the remaining portion of the country.

It appears that AT&T reconfigured connections in its network that affected 911 call routing for its VoLTE subscribers. As a result of these changes, automated call routing capability for VoLTE 911 calls failed. This activated a fallback mechanism, which routed VoLTE 911 calls to a backup call routing center for manual processing. The volume of calls, however, exceeded the call center's capability to manually process these calls, resulting in a large number of calls being blocked.

Some customers received fast busy signals when attempting to call 911, and were unable to connect with 911 call centers, commonly known as Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs). According to affected PSAPs, some customers reported that calls to 911 would ring continuously without being answered, while other customers reported hearing nothing at all.

Preliminary conversations with public safety officials and other stakeholders indicate that they received notice of the outage through various sources, including AT&T's Twitter feed, phone calls and e-mails from service providers to designated officials, and from other public

safety entities. In some cases, public safety officials initiated contact with AT&T to confirm that a 911 outage was taking place, and to verify the scope of the outage. State 911 entities took timely and appropriate steps to notify consumers of the outage and of alternative emergency contact information through mass notification services, social media, television and radio broadcasts. For example, public safety officials in Orange County, Florida reported that they reached out to local broadcast stations to run a visual crawl that contained a ten-digit alternative emergency number available to AT&T Mobility consumers affected by the outage. Public safety entities also reported using Twitter to notify consumers of the outage and alternative emergency contact information.

These outreach efforts directed the public to alternative emergency phone numbers during a time of need – Public safety officials in Orange County, Florida, for example, reported that they received 172 calls to an alternative emergency phone number in the hour and a half after they released the number.

Please note that three days later, on March 11, after our investigation was announced and underway, a second AT&T Mobility outage occurred. This outage appeared to affect some voice calling for AT&T Mobility VoLTE consumers. AT&T's research indicates that only a small percentage of its VoLTE 911 calls were potentially impacted because AT&T's VoLTE devices generally retry 911 calls on its 3G network. AT&T Mobility attributed this outage to a hardware failure. According to AT&T, the two outages were unrelated. We are looking into the March 11 outage as well.

Given the wide geographic scope of the outages and the critical importance of resilient 911 service, additional stakeholder input is necessary. To that end, the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau is today issuing a Public Notice that invites interested parties to submit information concerning the causes, effects, and implications of the March 8th and March 11th AT&T Mobility outages. In doing so, and in our continuing engagement with public safety and other state and local government officials, industry stakeholders and consumers, the Bureau seeks to develop a more complete picture of the circumstances of each outage.

Our overriding goal is not only to understand the circumstances that contributed to these outages and how they affected the public, but also to understand how the Commission, industry stakeholders and public safety officials, working together, can contribute to preventing these types of outages in the future.

The ongoing investigation into these outages reflects the hard work of the Bureau staff, and I greatly appreciate their tireless efforts.

Thank you.