

REMARKS OF CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI
AT THE PUBLIC SAFETY AND HOMELAND SECURITY BUREAU'S WORKSHOP ON
IMPROVING SITUATIONAL AWARENESS DURING 911 OUTAGES

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Today, we pause to mourn the thousands of lives lost in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. We also commemorate the firefighters, police, emergency medical workers, and others who responded to those attacks with such bravery. Their heroic sacrifices will never be forgotten.

Here at the FCC, the 16th anniversary of the September 11 attacks reminds us that we must do all that we can to improve emergency communications. As it happens, September is also National Preparedness Month. So there's no better time to recognize that effective communications can be the difference between life and death—whether emergency personnel are responding to a terrorist attack, hurricane, earthquake, flood, or tornado.

We've made significant headway over the last 16 years. But there's much more to be done to improve our emergency communications system. And at the core of that system is 911.

When Americans call 911, they expect their calls to go through. And they should. *Every* call for help should reach emergency responders. But on March 8, we were reminded that doesn't always happen, when one of the nation's largest wireless providers experienced a nationwide 911 outage. The FCC is working with stakeholders to learn from past 911 outages whether caused by natural disasters or man-made errors, in order to help prevent similar ones in the future. We also must ensure that when 911 outages do occur, emergency responders and the public are promptly notified and given the information they need.

After the March 911 outage, I immediately directed the Public Safety & Homeland Security Bureau to investigate its cause and impact. As part of its investigation, the Bureau sought input from many quarters. This included the public safety community. We asked them what they experienced during the outage, including how they were informed and how they, in turn, tried to inform the public about alternative ways to get help. We received valuable input, including from some of you. This workshop builds on that important conversation.

We have the expertise in this room—from the private sector, state and local governments, and other public safety officials—to meaningfully improve situational awareness during 911 outages. The professionals participating in today's roundtables have joined us from as far away as Colorado. They represent the diverse interests that can and must work together to ensure a reliable emergency communications system. Thank you all for being here.

This exchange comes at a critical time, as Hurricanes Harvey and Irma illustrate. Last week, I went to Texas to inspect the damage caused by Harvey and meet those engaged in recovery efforts. I heard first-hand from 911 call-takers and emergency communications personnel who worked tirelessly to serve their communities, even while their own families and homes were threatened.

When Texans' ability to call 911 became strained, many turned to social media. Some public safety entities used social media to tell residents to call 911 only for life-threatening emergencies and to use 311 for other purposes.

These efforts yielded many success stories. For example, on social media, emergency responders asked residents who owned boats and high-water vehicles to contact fire officials to help with rescues in

flooded neighborhoods. Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez tweeted during the disaster that a woman was going into labor and shared the address. An hour later, he updated his followers that the woman had been taken away in an ambulance. I personally heard about other cases in which online platforms helped those in need.

But despite the value of social media in times of disaster, our experience with Hurricane Harvey also underscores the importance of not confusing social media as a substitute for calling 911. During the disaster, for example, some public safety entities warned that social media was not the best means of communicating emergency rescue requests. All of this points to the need for best practices about how to communicate effectively both about 911 outages and during 911 outages.

The hard work of rebuilding after Hurricane Harvey coincides with the ongoing havoc wrought by Hurricane Irma. These and other storms in the works show that we can't let up on our public safety responsibilities. That's why today's workshop is so important. Each of you has been chosen to share your expertise so that we can develop best practices, combine resources, and ultimately enhance our emergency preparedness to protect all Americans.

I'd like to thank the Public Safety & Homeland Security Bureau for working with industry and government partners to support service continuity and restoration before, during, and after these hurricanes. I'd also like to thank the Bureau for hosting this workshop. Day in and day out, the FCC's staff work to make the American people safer, and I thank them for their service.

I'd also like to recognize the first responders and everyday citizens who have heroically stepped up to the plate during Hurricanes Harvey and Irma to help their fellow Americans. Just as we saw in the wake of the September 11 attacks, the worst of tragedies can also bring out the best in people.

Their labors underscore a fundamental truth: We're all in this together.

With that, I'm pleased to yield the floor back to James Wiley, who will cover some logistics and then kick off this discussion without further ado. Thank you for your attention.