

REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI
“WHEN DISASTER STRIKES: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF 911 DURING MAJOR DISASTERS”
AT THE NG911 INSTITUTE “LUNCH AND LEARN”

WASHINGTON, DC

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Thank you to the NG911 Institute for hosting this important discussion and for inviting me to participate. And thank you to the Institute’s Executive Director Patrick Halley for that kind introduction and for your friendship.

And most importantly, thank you to the first responders who are here today. We talk a lot here in Washington about improving 911 systems. But ultimately, 911 depends on the emergency responders on the front lines *doing* the job. These are the hardworking public servants who field calls, dispatch assistance, and eventually put out fires—sometimes literally. Your sacrifice and courage are inspirations to us all.

Your focus on the critical role of 911 during major disasters couldn’t be more timely. Last year, we saw the most devastating Atlantic hurricane season in recent memory, which included an unprecedented four major hurricanes making landfall in the United States. 2018 hasn’t been quiet, either. We’ve already witnessed deadly wildfires and mudslides in California, and as I’m sure you know, a false missile alert in Hawaii this past Saturday.

To be sure, the false alert isn’t specifically a 911 issue. But it did drive home in a dramatic way how critical it is for emergency communications systems to operate correctly.

Now, the false alert in Hawaii may not have resulted in serious physical injuries. But we shouldn’t minimize the panic felt by many Americans who—for up to 38 minutes—believed that they might have only minutes to live. Many placed calls to loved ones to say goodbye. You may have seen the video of a parent trying to put a child in a storm drain. It must have been searing for parents to experience that kind of fear with their children. What do you tell them about what’s going on?

The false alert sent in Hawaii was completely unacceptable and avoidable, and the FCC has already launched an investigation. We want to find out exactly what happened and how to make sure that it never happens again. Based on the information we’ve collected so far, it appears that the incident was caused both by human error and by the state of Hawaii not having reasonable safeguards in place to prevent that human error from leading to the transmission of a false alert.

And this leads to a lesson that is critical for emergency communications systems of all kinds, including 911. They shouldn’t be designed so that a single point of failure leads to a catastrophic result. Nothing and no one is perfect. Our emergency communications systems need to be designed to take account of these realities by having appropriate safeguards and redundancies.

This afternoon, we’ll hear firsthand from some of the heroes who helped lead the response to last year’s hurricanes and saved lives in Florida, Texas, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. I should note that one of those heroes, Stan Heffernan of Greater Harris County 911, hosted me when I visited Texas in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. I was inspired by what he showed me. For example, the homes of many of the 911 call center’s employees flooded, but these dedicated public servants didn’t let that stop them from getting the job done. Some of them both worked and slept at the call center in order to help Houstonians.

Two of our panelists are from Miami-Dade County. And following Hurricane Irma, I visited the Miami-Dade County Emergency Operations Center with my colleague Commissioner Clyburn. It was

impressive hearing and seeing how everyone—from emergency management personnel in that facility to a radio broadcaster in Key West—stepped up to serve South Florida.

I came away from my visits to Texas and Florida, as well as my trip to Puerto Rico, in awe of the work that is done by first responders. Emergency response is a life-and-death job. The highest stakes demand the highest standards. And the professionals I met in Houston, Miami, and San Juan certainly met those standards.

Of course, we also need emergency communications systems that meet the highest standards. The American public and our first responders deserve nothing less.

That's why I'd like to briefly outline two areas in which the FCC wants to work with the NG911 Institute and others in the public safety community.

The first involves best practices. We need to learn from our experiences over the last several months and develop best practices so that we're better prepared and more effective in responding to future disasters.

In December, our Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau issued a Public Notice seeking input on the public and private sectors' preparation for and response to the 2017 hurricane season. We want to know what worked and where we can improve service availability and restoration. And we want to hear from all stakeholders, including the public safety community; state, local, territorial, and tribal officials; industry; consumer groups; and federal response partners.

911 needs to be at the core of this conversation.

We've seen that major disasters place tremendous strain on the 911 system and make it harder for incoming calls to get through. When I visited Houston, for example, officials there told me that at Harvey's peak, they received more than 3,100 calls to 911 per hour—*10 times* the normal volume.

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) serving St. Croix was knocked out of service by Hurricane Maria. And of course, in many areas where PSAPs were able to receive calls, power outages cut off residents' access to telephone service—and with it their ability to call 911. This was a big problem in Puerto Rico.

So going forward, we have to harness expertise from the private sector and all levels of government to improve the resiliency of the 911 system, and address surges in call volumes.

The second area in which we want to work closely with you is in accelerating the transition of America's PSAPs to Next Generation 911.

Moving to NG911 is important for a whole host of reasons. One that's sometimes overlooked is that NG911 networks can support greater resiliency, redundancy, and reliability than legacy 911 networks.

To cite just one example, by linking PSAPs to a state or regional Emergency Services IP Network, or ESINet, NG911 can enable 911 calls to be rerouted when a local PSAP loses power or gets a surge of 911 calls. I saw the strength of this approach for myself during an informative public safety visit to Harrisburg, Illinois, hosted by the Co-Chair of the Congressional NG911 Caucus, Representative John Shimkus. A little over a dozen counties, mostly rural, came together and set up a unified public safety communications system with two major hubs. They created a robust NG911-capable network that leverages the advantages of scale and ensures that rural Illinoisans are protected wherever they are.

We also need to think about how to integrate NG911 with other key elements of the emergency communications ecosystem, including FirstNet and emergency alerts and warnings. Last fall, I visited 911 centers in Noblesville, Indiana, and Wichita, Kansas, and was impressed by the work those communities are doing to think about these issues.

Developing best practices and accelerating NG911 deployment—these are just two of the challenges in front of us. There’s more to do, as I’m sure you know. And who better to learn from than some of the public safety professionals who were literally in the eye of the storm during Harvey, Irma, and Maria?

Thanks again to them and to all the first responders who heroically stepped into the breach to help their fellow Americans.

Helping them achieve their mission is in the FCC’s DNA. Section 1 of the Communications Act charges the Commission with “promoting safety of life and property through the use of wire and radio communications.” We’re committed to meeting that challenge by working with you to give you the communications tools you need to keep people safe in times of trouble.