

**REMARKS OF
COMMISSIONER JESSICA ROSENWORCEL
15TH ANNUAL 9-1-1 AWARDS AND 50TH ANNIVERSARY
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Good evening. Thank you to the NG 9-1-1 Institute for having me join you today and to the Next Generation 9-1-1 Caucus, including Senator Klobuchar, Senator Burr, Representative Eshoo, and Representative Shimkus for your work every day. Plus, it is an honor to follow Senator Schatz, who has been a force for public safety and to appear with Congressman Aderholt, who represents Hayleyville, Alabama—the birthplace of 9-1-1.

I want to start by talking about where it all began. Hayleyville is tucked into the northwest corner of Alabama. It may be a small town, but it deserves a big place in the history books. Because it was here half a century ago this week that the first 9-1-1 call took place. Rankin Fite, a state legislator, made that call—and made public safety history.

I think the best part of this first call is actually the paperwork. There is a typewritten work order that carefully itemizes the steps the technicians in Alabama were required to take to make the 9-1-1 system work in Hayleyville. If you read it, you will marvel at the network detail and the physical tasks necessary to install the system. But my favorite part of this work order is what is handwritten. There is an unassuming scribble in the corner, where the President of the Alabama Telephone Company thanked the plant manager for his efforts making 9-1-1 come to life. His scrawl simply says: “Bob: You did good.”

How’s that for an understatement? Because that one call did a lot more than good. What happened in the wake of this effort in Hayleyville is significant. A week later—on the other side of the country—Nome, Alaska announced that they, too, had implemented 9-1-1 service. Then slowly, but surely, the service reached communities across the country. In 1976, 9-1-1 was serving 17 percent of the country. In 1987, that number jumped to half the country. And by the end of the last century, 93 percent of the population was covered by some form of 9-1-1 service. Congress made a nod to the local work that brought this about and just before the turn of the millennium pronounced 9-1-1 the national emergency number in the Wireless Communications and Public Safety Act.

Today, 9-1-1 has never been more popular. There are roughly 240 million calls a year made to 9-1-1. Nearly 80 percent of them now come from wireless phones—which is an extraordinary shift in our calling culture. All of these calls are answered by emergency personnel in more than 6000 public safety answering points across the country.

These numbers, however, don’t tell the whole story. Because the most essential fact about 9-1-1 is that it is the first place we turn when the unthinkable occurs. As the old saying goes, you may only may only call 9-1-1 once, but it will be the most important call you ever make.

So today let's celebrate the history of Hayleyville—and the present of 9-1-1 by bestowing honors on some dynamic individuals and organizations: Tamika Greer, Roger Marshall, Cheryl Kagan and the 9-1-1 programs from Monmouth County, New Jersey; Orange County, Florida; and the District of Columbia. They deserve our righteous praise and deepest gratitude.

But I believe we celebrate 9-1-1 best by securing its future. I think that means three things.

First, let's talk about our 9-1-1 operators. When crises mount, they answer calls with steely calm and then help ensure that help is on the way. I know, because I have seen them in action at more than two dozen public safety answering points all across the country. They keep us safe. They save lives. They are everyday heroes. But Washington doesn't always treat them that way. In the Standard Occupational Classification, the Office of Management and Budget classifies them as clerical workers. That's not right. They are first responders—protective service professionals. And we owe them the dignity of that title as we move ahead to secure the future of 9-1-1.

Second, let's talk about definitions. We need a collective vision for next generation 9-1-1. We know that mixing today's calls with new forms of data and video communications will lead to new possibilities for public safety. For those who call in an emergency, it will mean the opportunity to offer real-time video from an accident. It will mean the ability to provide first responders with instantaneous pictures of a fleeing suspect or emergency incident. For those who take calls in an emergency, all this data can expedite and inform public safety efforts, dramatically improving emergency response. But when we talk about next generation 9-1-1 in one jurisdiction it needs to mean the same thing in another jurisdiction. For next generation 9-1-1 to live up to its promise, we need seamless interoperability—and a common definition. The sooner we develop it, the better.

Third, let's talk about funding. We know that we will not realize the potential of next generation 9-1-1 without coming up with new systems to support emergency communications. Because updating 9-1-1 is a big job. It's a shame that funds for next generation 9-1-1 are absent in the most recent national infrastructure proposal. Because the way I see it, there is no more essential infrastructure for our day-to-day safety.

Thank you. Congratulations again to those we honor today and know you have my appreciation for the work you and your colleagues do every day.