

**REMARKS OF  
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911-WHERE'S YOUR EMERGENCY  
NG911 INSTITUTE  
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Good afternoon. Thank you to the NG911 Institute for inviting me to kick off this lunch and learn event on Capitol Hill. You've given it a snappy title: "911—Where's your emergency?" And the answer is, it's everywhere. Across the country, there are 240 million calls a year made to 911. Nearly 80 percent of them now come from wireless phones—so knowing where you are in crisis when you call is important. But before I get to the mechanics of location accuracy and what we need to do about it, I want to tell a story.

We just marked the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Harvey. As you may remember, it swept through Texas and brought with it unimaginable wind—and that wind was accompanied by a trillion gallons of rain. The images from those wet days are hard to forget—the streets submerged, the homes flooded, and the incredible damage that rising water can do.

Niky Smith is someone who remembers the storm like it was yesterday. That's because when the rains came, she was on duty as a Communications Manager for the Houston Office of Emergency Management. She ran the 911 call center in a part of town known as Cyprus Creek.

My office spoke with her recently. She described her efforts to gather her team of 911 operators to prepare before the storm made landfall. She knew it would be a big emergency. But it was bigger and more devastating than anything she believed could ever happen in her hometown.

When the storm made landfall, the 911 calls multiplied—exponentially. In 96 hours her team handled a record number of 12,228 calls. They heard from families trapped in rising water. They heard from relatives worried about their kin desperately in need of health care, including a grandfather seeking help for his grandson with special needs. They answered the line when calls came in about impassible roads from individuals stuck in their cars concerned about safety. And they did what 911 operators do—they organized assistance from police, fire, and emergency medical services. They worked to help anyone who was in harm's way—wherever they were.

The calls were overwhelming. Across Houston, there are people who died after calling 911 because first responders were unable to locate them in time. As Niky describes it, it was more than the sheer volume, it was that every call was a cry for help from her community. People dial 911 on the worst days of their lives, and here they were calling in droves. She watched her colleagues take every call they could with steely calm. But she also saw them pause between conversations and wipe tears from their eyes.

There is a quiet heroism in the work of people like Niky and her colleagues. And it is present in the work of so many 911 operators across the country every day. Their expertise at managing calls, navigating the dispatch of first responders, and coordinating assistance helps keep us safe and save lives.

Unfortunately, Washington does not treat 911 operators with the respect they deserve. The Office of Management and Budget is responsible for a program known as the Standard Occupational Classification, which is an occupational data set that is widely used by state and federal authorities. It classifies 911 operators as “clerical workers.” This is outdated—and it needs to be fixed.

911 operators are first responders. When the unthinkable occurs, they are our first contact with public safety. Before a police radio crackles, a fire engine roars, or an ambulance races, there is a 911 professional who takes in a call and sets emergency response in motion. They deserve to be classified, like their public safety peers, as “protective service professionals.”

Failing to provide them with this classification in Washington diminishes the importance of their role in crisis. It dismisses how they do everything from coordinating response from police and fire officials to providing medical assistance before paramedics arrive. In short, it is their judgment and expertise that connects us to help when we are in harm. It is time to fix this problem—and give 911 professionals the dignity of the public classification they deserve.

It is also time to recognize that people like Niky can do their job better when every call comes with accurate location information.

You heard me mention at the start that nearly 80 percent of calls now come from wireless phones. Let’s be honest—that is not the kind of calling our 911 systems were initially built to handle. They were built for clunky, wired devices—you know, the kind with a cord and a jack in the wall. But over time we have changed how we reach out in danger and the 911 system has adjusted. It now accommodates wireless calling, VoIP calling, and in some locations texting. But all this change in how we reach out in crisis has consequences—because these new ways of making a call do not provide the same level of location information for the 911 operator taking that call.

And that’s a problem. We need to do something about it. There are a lot of efforts underway. In fact, there are so many of them, it can be hard to track. Let me note a few of them for you—right here, right now.

In 2015, the FCC updated rules to improve indoor wireless location accuracy. In the intervening years we have seen progress—a testbed has been established, a database is in place, and carriers file progress reports about the percentage of calls that now include dispatchable location or its x, y coordinate equivalent. This effort is ongoing. To this end, today the largest wireless carriers announced that they are rolling out device-based hybrid location technology, which marks another step on the road to making sure that 911 operators will know a caller’s location.

Last year, the FCC kicked off a proceeding to look into the 911 problems with “enterprise communications systems”—the type of phone systems you might find in an office park or hotel. Earlier this year, the agency launched an inquiry into how 911 calls from wireless phones are misrouted to the wrong call public safety answering point.

Capitol Hill also has put pressure on this effort—and rightfully so. In the Ray Baum’s Act, which was part of appropriations legislation this year, Congress tasked the FCC with holding a proceeding that takes a look at how we can ensure that dispatchable location is conveyed with every 911 call, regardless of the platform used. Later this month—at our September meeting—the FCC will begin this effort.

That’s a lot going on. But in the end, there is only one thing that matters. And that one thing is simple, actually. It’s when you call Niky Smith or tens of thousands of 911 call operators like her—they have the location information they need to send help. And when the FCC completes its work pursuant to the Ray Baum’s Act, it is unacceptable if it fails to include a date certain by which 911 callers across the country can expect that whenever, wherever, and however they call for help—first responders can find them.

Thank you.