

**REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI AT
APCO 85th ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND EXPO 2019**

BALTIMORE, MD

AUGUST 13, 2019

Good morning! Thank you for that warm welcome. It's great to be with APCO. If it feels like I was with you recently, I was—it was less than three months ago that many of us were together in Arlington, Virginia for APCO's Leadership in Policy Awards Dinner. Thank you again for honoring me that evening. It was truly humbling to be recognized by the nation's premier coalition of public-safety communications professionals. To paraphrase the famous line from Wayne's World, I'm not sure if I'm worthy, but I'm certainly grateful.

And what an honor it is to share a stage with former Baltimore Ravens coach Brian Billick! You probably know him as the man who led the team to the Super Bowl XXXV championship. But I feel like I know him on a deeper level: as a great Twitter follow, as a contestant on a 1977 episode of the Match Game, and as the man who memorably once said "I don't think you can really trust a man who likes to dance." And even though we just met, I feel like he knows me, too; another famous Billickism is that "[w]hen you're 50 years old, you're going to be listed as questionable every week. At that age, questionable is pretty good." Sure, he was talking about Deion Sanders way back when, but perhaps he anticipated appearing someday with a Washington bureaucrat nearing a half-century on the field.

On a serious note, regardless of the award you've given me or the Lombardi Trophy that Coach Billick has won, we all know that the real heroes in the room today are APCO's members. You literally save lives, day in and day out.

I'd like to offer a special congratulations to the recipients of this year's Public Safety Communications and Technology Leadership Awards. Looking at the list of honorees, one thing that caught my attention: some honorees come from places that may seem off-the-beaten-path, but because of unforeseen emergencies, they found themselves at the center of a major event.

Take, for example, Maureen Will, Director of the Year. When she took the job as head of the Emergency Communications Center in Newtown, Connecticut, she probably had no idea that she would one day respond to the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary and become one of the nation's leading experts on active assailant events, training her peers across the country.

Or take North Andover Fire and Communications. North Andover, Massachusetts, is often described as a bedroom community. But this past September 13, your Team of the Year found itself dealing with an outbreak of dozens of fires and explosions of area gas lines.

It doesn't matter how big the community you serve is or where it is located, everyone in your line of work—from the information technologists to the trainers to the 911 dispatchers—must be on top of their game because lives are depending on it. That's an incredible burden. But time and again, day in and day out, you prove that you are up to the challenge. I've seen this professionalism on display during my many visits to PSAPs over the years, in cities large and small. And I've seen it through APCO's advocacy at the FCC.

Just as your jobs in emergency response carry heavy responsibilities, the FCC feels a duty to do what we can to help you do your jobs.

And even though I was with you less than three months ago, I'm pleased to say that in the time since, we've taken significant steps to support you.

Earlier this month, the Commission adopted significant new rules that will make it easier for the

public to reach 911 and easier for emergency responders to locate every 911 caller.

In particular, these new rules will help people who dial 911 from centralized communications systems—like phones that are used in office buildings, schools, and hotels—directly access emergency response. All too often, these systems require that you dial 9 to make an external call, which can create confusion and has caused too many 911 calls to not go through. This can be much more than just a minor inconvenience.

Many of you already know the story of Kari Hunt, who was attacked and killed by her estranged husband in a Marshall, Texas hotel room. Her nine-year-old daughter was in the room and tried calling 911 on the hotel phone. Kari's daughter dialed 911 four times during her mother's attack. But not one of her calls ever connected because the hotel phone required guests to dial a "9" for an outbound line.

Thanks to the heroic work of Kari's father, Hank Hunt, Congress passed, and the President signed Kari's Law. The purpose of this legislation is to enable users of multi-line telephone systems to dial 911 directly, without having to dial a prefix to reach an outside line. On August 1, the Commission adopted rules to implement this law. We don't want the tragedy that inspired it to be repeated. The new rules also help ensure that a front desk or security office is notified by a multi-line telephone system when a 911 call is made. This will give first responders easier and quicker access to the building and to the person who called.

Another public safety problem is that first responders too often can't easily find people calling 911 from hotels, office buildings, and similar locations. They may know the relevant building, but not the room or office where help is needed.

The FCC aims to change that. Earlier this month, and consistent with a new law called the RAY BAUM's Act, we adopted rules to help ensure that "dispatchable location" information, such as the street address, floor level, and room number of a 911 caller, is conveyed with 911 calls—regardless of the technological platform used. Going forward, I am optimistic that first responders will get a 911 caller's location more quickly and precisely, whether the call comes from a multi-line telephone system, fixed telephone service, VoIP provider, Telecommunications Relay Service, or mobile texting service.

Turning to another important public safety issue: you need a reliable and effective means of communicating with the public when disaster strikes. The Wireless Emergency Alert system is one important tool for doing that. As you know, it allows emergency managers to quickly convey potentially life-saving information to the public on their mobile devices. But APCO and other public safety stakeholders have told us that Wireless Emergency Alert messages must be more geographically precise—that is, information is delivered only to the people who need it. When people consistently receive alerts that don't apply to them, the tool becomes less effective.

We've heard your call. Last year, the FCC required providers who participate in Wireless Emergency Alerts to deliver alerts to the area specified by the emergency managers, with an overshoot of no more than one-tenth of a mile, by November 30, 2019.

I'm encouraged to hear that a chip manufacturer has stepped up to the plate and produced an initial software release to support geo-targeting months in advance of their earlier projections. And I'm encouraged to hear that major wireless providers have developed test cases for enhanced geo-targeting and have already opened their labs for device testing.

But there is more work to be done. And so I am re-emphasizing my call to all stakeholders to continue working cooperatively and expeditiously to meet the November 30 deadline. We want wireless emergency alerts to empower emergency managers and protect the public when communities are in danger.

Now, so far, I've talked about making sure that APCO members have the technological tools you need. But I'd like to close by mentioning a common-sense proposal to make sure you get the recognition

you deserve. Under current federal guidelines, 911 operators and dispatchers are classified as “Office and Administrative Support”—not as first responders. No disrespect to administrative support staff, but that doesn’t make sense. At any given moment, a 911 operator can instantly find herself in the middle of a life-and-death situation, where her ability to stay calm and quickly make the right decision could determine if disaster is averted. It’s hard to think of a more stressful and challenging position. That’s the sense I get talking to dispatchers—including Marti Shields, my high school classmate and long-time dispatcher in Parsons, Kansas. Classifying her and the nation’s other 100,000 911 call-takers and dispatchers as administrative support is divorced from reality, and the time has come to fix this mistake.

I therefore want to thank Congresswoman Norma Torres—the only former 911 dispatcher serving in Congress—and Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick for pioneering a bipartisan solution to reclassify public safety telecommunicators as first responders. I’m pleased that their proposal was attached to the House version of this year’s defense authorization bill. And I hope that one way or another, the 911 SAVES Act becomes law.

Let me finish by saying, yet again, that APCO’s members will always have my deepest respect and admiration. You provide a vital service in the most difficult circumstances. To borrow one last time from Coach Billick, “[p]assion, emotion and intensity are good, but they’ve always got to be under control.” You meet that tough standard every day. It has been a pleasure working with you over the past few years, and I look forward to building on our foundation of progress to make our public safety communications systems stronger and our country safer.