

**REMARKS OF  
CHAIRWOMAN JESSICA ROSENWORCEL  
FIRSTNET 10-YEAR ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION  
NATIONAL PRESS CLUB  
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Good afternoon. It's great to be with so many public safety heroes today.

Let me start by saying thank you. Thank you for your service. And thank you Chris Moore and Chief Jeff Johnson for that kind introduction. Last October, Chief Johnson served as a panelist for a field hearing the Federal Communications Commission held on network recovery following disasters. He shared his first-hand experience responding to fires and his ideas about what we can do to ensure our communications are capable when we need them most. I'm glad that today I can reciprocate and speak at this event with you and so many other public safety leaders.

This event is a celebration of FirstNet's 10th anniversary. That's a big milestone. The truth is we may not have had a first anniversary—let alone a tenth—without the work that so many of you did to rally legislators, companies, first responders, and the public at large to create something truly remarkable: A secure nationwide communications network for public safety. Thanks to your efforts, ten years ago Congress created the First Responder Network Authority to help build just that. And the last ten years have proved the point. Because FirstNet has grown to become a vital partner for public safety. The numbers alone show how far we've come. It is now a network with more than three million connections covering nearly three million square miles and used by more than 19,000 public safety agencies nationwide.

Beyond numbers, what does this mean? The FirstNet network uses spectrum that is unique. It is dedicated nationwide to prioritizing public safety communications during emergency. On top of this, FirstNet deployable assets are used to help boost connectivity after storms and other disasters. Plus, FirstNet services are now being used at COVID-19 testing centers, field hospitals, and incident command posts.

At the FCC, we are working hard to match this energy with public safety. Over the past year we've taken action to ensure that public safety is better informed, better resourced, and better prepared. In March, we adopted a new framework for sharing outage information with state, federal, and Tribal public safety agencies to improve situational awareness and help save lives. In April, we proposed new rules to make sure 911 call centers and the public get timely notifications of network disruptions that affect 911 service. In June, we adopted new policies to help end 911 fee diversion—that's when states take those fees on your bill that say they are for 911 but then spend them on something else. It's not right, it's not fair, and it puts public safety at risk. In August, working with FEMA, the FCC conducted a nationwide test of Wireless Emergency Alerts. In September, we started a rulemaking to better understand evolving threats to 911 call centers, including ransomware and other cybersecurity threats. In October, we started a rulemaking to consider network resiliency, after Commissioner Carr and I toured storm damage from Hurricane Ida in Louisiana.

Here's the thing about anniversaries: They are an opportunity to reassess the past, take stock of the present, and mobilize interest in the future. That's what I'd like to do today. So I want to kick off my remarks with a look at the past, then share some thoughts on the present, and close with a big idea for the future.

*First, a lesson from the past.*

It is impossible to mark this anniversary without also remembering one of our most difficult days. The events of September 11, 2001, left an indelible mark on this country. In my family that mark is personal, because we lost a relative in the Twin Towers.

What strikes me now is how those attacks drew us together as a nation. We united in inexplicable grief and shared sorrow. But we also saw how the worst brought out the best in us, and we are forever grateful for the heroism of so many first responders who ran toward danger and saved the lives of so many more.

It is hard to believe it has now been more than two decades since that day and two decades since we learned that when emergency personnel came from all over to help in this unimaginable crisis, they could not effectively communicate with one another because each jurisdiction had its own communications protocols.

It was those failures, more than twenty years ago, that put us on course to this moment and this gathering today. That's extraordinary. But this experience confirms just how hard it can be to advance public safety. It takes patience and perseverance. Just do the math. FirstNet was born out of a recommendation from the 9/11 Commission report, which came out in 2004. FirstNet wasn't authorized by Congress until 2012. In my lifetime, no event has done more to unite this country and galvanize support for policy responses. But it still took nearly eight years to get this done.

I know how hard it was; after all, I had a front-row seat. Because as some of you know, I served as counsel to Senate Commerce Committee and Senator Jay Rockefeller, who helped lead the charge to create FirstNet.

As I mentioned a moment ago, this effort was informed by the 9/11 Commission report. But I think the fundamental idea behind it goes back even further—all the way back to the Communications Act of 1934. In the very first sentence of this law, Congress instructed the FCC to make available “to all the people of the United States . . . a rapid, efficient, Nation-wide, and world-wide wire and radio communication service” in order to promote “the safety of life and property.”

Think about that. Eighty-eight years ago, when Congressional leaders were establishing our first expert agency on communications technology, they understood that promoting public safety should be central to the mission of this new body. I think they were right, and that mission is still vital today.

So remember this. It takes time to launch a public safety initiative. It takes a community. But as we've learned, it's worth the effort.

*Now on to the present.*

If the past taught us that we need to bring public safety along as we transition to next-generation technologies, then we need to make sure we are heeding that lesson in the here and now.

I am proud to say the FCC is making an effort to do just that. Two years ago, over my objection, the agency decided that public safety no longer needed airwaves in the 4.9 GHz band to support their mission. Under new rules, state licensees could kick first responders off this spectrum and lease it to third parties to generate revenue.

The public safety community thought this was a bad idea, and so did I. For two decades since 9/11, it has been government policy to increase opportunities for interoperability for first responders. These new rules would have reversed that trend by reducing public safety communications interoperability and fragmenting the market for equipment. This would set us back.

So one of my first actions as Chairwoman of the FCC was to vacate these earlier rules. At the same time, we kicked off a new rulemaking to think big about the future of the 4.9 GHz band—with public safety front of mind.

For starters, we've asked how using this spectrum we can advance public safety access to the latest technologies, like 5G. And we've got new ideas to make it happen. We are exploring expanding priority and preemption for first responders, excess capacity leasing to create new commercial opportunities, and shared access models like the Citizens Broadband Radio Service. We've compiled a comprehensive record in this proceeding and we're reviewing it carefully now. I'm convinced there are creative opportunities for this spectrum that will help us expand our 5G future and bring public safety communications along, too.

So to recap: We've learned lessons about public safety from the past and corrected course in the present.

*Now I want to talk about how we can build on this for the future.*

With FirstNet we are remaking our first responder networks for the digital age. Now I think we need a plan to remake our 911 systems for the digital age, too. After all, a public safety network is only as powerful as the networks that allow all of us to reach emergency services in the first place.

And let's face it. Our 911 systems need an upgrade. There are more than 6,000 911 call centers across the country and many of them are using legacy technology built for an era when calls in crisis came strictly from landline phones.

Plus, 911 outages have become far too common. In 2014, more than 6,000 emergency calls went unanswered because of a multistate system outage that affected more than 11 million people across seven states—Washington, North Carolina, South Carolina, Minnesota, California, Florida, and Pennsylvania. In 2017, a social media post with a link targeting faulty phone software caused people’s cellphones to repeatedly call 911 in cities across the country in what investigators think was the largest cyberattack on the country’s 911 system. During this time, emergency call centers in at least a dozen states were overwhelmed for two days.

In the fall of 2020, 911 services went down again in 14 states, some for as long as an hour and a half. Later that summer, we also saw a nationwide outage that resulted in more than 23,000 calls to 911 not reaching emergency call centers.

We can do better than this. We have led the world in wireless. The digital revolution began here, on our shores. I think we should lead in emergency communications, too. That means it is time to make the switch nationwide to next-generation 911 systems.

Next-generation 911 means better support for voice, text, data, and video communications—and more opportunities for redundancy to protect against outages, too. For those who call 911, it will mean the opportunity to offer real-time video of the emergency. It will mean the ability to provide first responders with instantaneous pictures. It will mean the ability to transmit a patient’s medical records right to 911 dispatchers. For those who take calls in an emergency, all of this data can expedite and inform public safety efforts, and dramatically improve emergency response.

But here’s the challenge. These kinds of 911 investments don’t come cheap. And for the thousands of communities across the country that have to do these upgrades, it’s not clear where the support to make them will come from.

But I think there’s a way to do this. Let me describe how.

Back in 2012, Congress gave the FCC authority to use an innovative spectrum auction to help usher more spectrum into commercial wireless markets. The spectrum auction that we held in the 600 MHz band took full advantage of this authority—but then did one better. Because after auctioning the public airwaves we set aside the revenue raised for public safety. This was the seed funding for FirstNet. If you recall, under the law the first \$7 billion in revenue raised from this auction went to set up our first nationwide network for first responders. It was a terrific idea—and it’s the network we’re celebrating here today.

It’s time to do something similar for 911. Historically, our nation’s 911 systems have been updated through fees on bills and a mix of town, county, and state funding measures. But as with first responder communications, it’s time for a nationwide, digital upgrade. This is a generational change that needs billions in broader support.

So take note. The FCC’s authority to auction spectrum is scheduled to expire at the end of this fiscal year. That’s September 30, 2022. Now is the time for Congress to develop legislation to extend it—so the agency can continue to offer airwaves for new commercial uses.

But it can go one better and copy the model used to create FirstNet. It can take the first set of funds raised from our next auctions and use them to support a nationwide upgrade of 911.

Once again, we would be using the auction of public airwaves to support public safety. And the funds would flow to every state and jurisdiction with 911 call centers to help make next-generation 911 a reality nationwide.

Think of it this way: *This is next-generation spectrum for next-generation 911.*

I think this is a golden opportunity. But like with FirstNet, this idea for public safety spectrum will take time. It will take perseverance. It will take work to develop this idea with legislators, companies, first responders, and the public. But it's worth the effort. Because 600,000 people call 911 every day. So many of them dial when disaster strikes, the unthinkable occurs, and when they need help in the most fundamental way. Every one of those calls should be answered by a call center with full access to digital age technologies. Every one of those calls should be answered using next-generation 911. And ten years from now, if we are successful, I hope we can re-convene this group to celebrate the anniversary of another major leap forward for public service communications.

I look forward to working with you to make it happen.

Thank you.