



OFFICE OF THE
CHAIRWOMAN

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON

February 13, 2023

New York State Attorney General Letitia James
Office of the Attorney General
The Capitol
Albany, NY 12224

VIA EMAIL

Dear Attorney General James:

Thank you for your letter regarding language accessibility in the nation's Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system. In New York, Hurricane Ida demonstrated that natural disasters do not affect all equally. In particular, the storm showed that language barriers can add to the challenges communities face during disaster, by limiting the effectiveness of information and outreach. In short, having accurate facts in disaster can help save lives. This is true in New York—and in the rest of the country, too. For that reason, I share your belief that our emergency alerting systems need to do more to deliver essential warnings in the language that is most likely to reach those in the communities who need this information most.

For my part, I had the opportunity to see firsthand the devastation wrought by Hurricane Ida when I visited Louisiana shortly after the storm made landfall. I traveled from Baton Rouge to New Orleans to survey the damage to communications and speak to people in the areas affected by the storm. When I returned to Washington, I continued to engage with affected communities by holding a Disaster Communications Field Hearing to learn more about gaps in our emergency alerting capabilities and the steps we can take to better prepare for the next storm.

I am proud to say we are making progress on that effort. At the Federal Communications Commission, we have adopted new rules to improve the resiliency of our wireless networks. These changes will help restore communications service faster, speed up emergency response, and keep more people connected. We have also taken action to improve emergency alerting capabilities, including by partnering with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on a nationwide test, establishing new partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies to gather more granular information about WEA performance, and initiating rulemakings that would require wireless providers to publicly report on WEA's reliability, speed, and accuracy and to protect it from security threats.

But our work is not done. We are examining several additional ways we can strengthen WEA.

At the outset, it is important to note that WEA was created by Congress in the Warning, Alert, and Response Network (WARN) Act of 2006 as a voluntary program. In other words, no wireless carrier is required to offer WEA. This is something that I believe is dated and premised on the idea that wireless alerts are not the primary means of the public getting information during a crisis. The record shows that this is no longer true. The updates we receive to these devices are essential for all communities.

In 2016 the Commission took a step in this direction when it required wireless providers that participate in WEA to support the transmission of emergency alerts in Spanish. As a result of that action, more than 90 percent of the country can receive alerts in a language they understand. However, as you recognize we have more work to do to incorporate other languages to reach the rest of the country.

To that end, I would like to commend the New York City Emergency Management Department on the work it has done to advance multilingual alerting through its Notify NYC application. I understand that the application supports multilingual alerting in 14 different languages by presenting an English-language message along with a link to 13 other pre-scripted translations. I also understand that these alert message translations have been written by people fluent in the languages and vetted with native speakers from language communities. This allows alerts to reach communities of people who otherwise may not understand the alerts they receive.

I believe what works in New York can work in the rest of the country, too. That is why today I sent letters to the nine largest providers that participate in WEA about what they can do right now to ensure that WEA messages are accessible to as many language communities as possible. After reviewing the responses, I will ask the staff of the agency to incorporate what we have learned in a rulemaking to refresh the Commission's record on multilingual alerting, including on the current state of machine translation technologies for alert messages for both the 14 most common languages as well as other, less common languages.

Thank you for your work on this important issue. I look forward to working with you to ensure that everyone has reliable and equitable access to emergency information when they need it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jessica Rosenworcel", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jessica Rosenworcel

cc: Meredith Attwell Baker, President & CEO, CTIA
Kenneth Graham, Director, National Weather Service
Mary Erickson, Deputy Director, National Weather Service
Deanne Criswell, FEMA Administrator
U.S. Senator Charles Schumer
U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand
Governor of the State of New York, Kathy Hochul
Mayor of New York City, Eric Adams