

STATEMENT for Senator Cleland

Hearing on the Response of the Technology Sector in times of Crisis

December 5, 2001

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing today. I believe many of us here on Capitol Hill were in the same situation on September 11 when we were unable to communicate with staff, each other, or anyone else. Each call I made was met with a "busy signal" because the network was overloaded. In today's society when I can "instant message" someone on the other side of the world and receive a reply seconds later, it is a little frustrating to realize that the telephone network, which is virtually ubiquitous, was not able to accommodate the traffic created on the 11th. How can technology help expand the telephone system's capability? And, what other technologies are available commercially for citizens to purchase in order to help them communicate with loved ones in times of emergencies? These are simple questions I asked myself and my staff after that day.

While we are looking at the ways to deal with the problems that may result from a future attack or problem, I believe we should also focus on what work has already been done. During the preparation for the year 2000 or "Y2K," there was an evaluation of the nation's infrastructure. Not only would it be helpful to review past information, but also I believe it would be beneficial to see how existing technologies could be used to alleviate future problems. For example, researchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology, with sponsorship by the Marine Corps, demonstrated the utility of local area networks to enable responders in a chemical emergency hot zone to have two-way reachback communications to anyone in the world.

This experiment showed that emergency doctors at Grady Hospital in Atlanta and US Army chemical treatment experts in Maryland could view patient diagnostic data over the Internet and authorize treatment for simulated chemical agent casualties. The capability also allowed first responders to communicate at the incident through wireless handheld computers in the palm-pilot class. We need to do more to demonstrate and use this type of advanced information technology because it is survivable and interoperable. Furthermore, such technology is commercial off-the-shelf technology which is readily available and can provide an economic stimulus to these high tech industries.

As someone who experienced the communications logjam of September 11, I look forward to hearing the testimony today of these witnesses, and listening to their ideas on how to improve the current system.