

Testimony of  
**Karima Holmes**  
Director, Office of Unified Communications

“An Evaluation of FirstNet’s Progress”

before  
the Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, Innovation, and the Internet

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Good morning Chairman Wicker, Subcommittee Chair Thune, Ranking Member Senator Schatz, Senator Cantwell, other distinguished subcommittee members, staff, guests and viewing public. My name is Karima Holmes and I am the Director of Washington, DC's Office of Unified Communications (OUC), which is the city's Emergency Communications Center (ECC) or consolidated 9-1-1/3-1-1 center. I am proud to sit before you today representing one of the over 6,500 ECCs across the nation. I deeply appreciate this opportunity to highlight the vital role that the 9-1-1 center plays in creating a comprehensive and truly seamless first responder network. Today's ECCs are public safety communications nerve centers that have evolved extensively beyond early iterations and have become dynamic and highly technical operations capable of quickly processing an immense volume of datapoints to ensure both first responder safety and the most efficient and appropriate response to emergencies. In a very real sense, 9-1-1 call takers and dispatchers are the first-first responders. It is with profound respect for my colleagues in this profession that I offer my testimony today.

Before I continue, I would also like to state for the record that I was appointed to the First Net Authority Board in October 2019. However, my testimony today will only reflect my perspective as the District of Columbia's 9-1-1 Director and will be based on the expertise I honed during my decades-long career at the helm of ECCs in the states of Georgia, Texas, and the nation's capital, as well as through my extensive industry engagement with 9-1-1 advocacy groups such as the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials, the National Association of State 911 Administrators and the National Emergency Number Association.

The essential mission of the District's 9-1-1 center, the Office of Unified Communications, is to provide accurate, professional and expedited emergency and non-emergency call management for the District of Columbia while maintaining radio interoperability between 27 local, regional and federal first responder agencies and other partners in the District and across the National Capital Region (NCR).

The OUC operates and maintains 10 radio tower sites, over 8,000 radios for the city's police, fire and emergency medical services personnel, along with a regional cache of close to 1,000 radios which are deployed for planned events like Inauguration and unplanned occurrences such as protests or major weather systems, as well as thousands of first responder mobile data computing units, and other handheld devices. All told, the District's ECC processes over 3 million 9-1-1 and 3-1-1 calls and 12 million push-to-talk radio transmissions annually. Understanding the critical importance of maintaining secure and reliable connectivity for this vast operation, the District of Columbia began testing broadband-type solutions for public safety over ten years ago. And when FirstNet launched, my ECC was quick to subscribe.

More recently, we completely overhauled our technical infrastructure, software platforms and critical programs by completing a telephony system upgrade, introducing Text-to-911 and executing criteria based dispatching protocols among other improvements. These enhancements, coupled with the First Net platform and First Net powered devices deployed and maintained by my agency, the District has been better able to provide informed responses to incidents through First Net's reliable, integrated communications network.

In fact, as the nation grappled with the far-reaching demands brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington DC Mayor Muriel Bowser commissioned me to leverage the full extent our capabilities to enact methods that would safeguard my staff while maintaining the District's public safety lifeline without interruption. Immediately, I spread my staff out between our worksites and transitioned some of my teams to operate remotely. MiFi devices powered by FirstNet have enabled my entire administrative staff, my 3-1-1 agents and my non-emergency 9-1-1 call taking operation to telework using a secure, reliable connection, from their homes.

Having a secure network – knowing that the critical information that we are processing related to literally hundreds of incidents per hour - from the caller, to the call taker, to police and fire and emergency medical responders in the field in the most secure manner possible – is not negotiable. These are high stakes circumstances and First Net has made this a reality for my ECC, without condition. The District and its stakeholders have benefited greatly from the bold innovation of the First Net Authority.

Due primarily to its physical proximity to and responsibility for providing public safety communications services for the seat of government, the District of Columbia's ECC operates with a unique advantage over most other ECCs in terms of resources and support. I would be remiss not to recognize this privilege and use this opportunity to advocate for resources that will help every ECC in this country implement the same lifesaving technologies.

With that said, I would also like to mention that this is a pivotal time for all ECCs across the US. As 9-1-1 centers handle higher call volume for increasingly extreme and dire

circumstances, the public safety communications industry has been collectively engaged in determining how all 9-1-1 centers can best execute their missions to serve as the vital link between the public and first responders. As you may know, publicly available communications technologies have substantially outpaced the legacy communications technologies still used by most 9-1-1 systems across the country.

Because most 9-1-1 systems were originally built using analog rather than digital technologies, ECCs need to be upgraded to a digital or Internet Protocol (IP)-based 9-1-1 system, commonly referred to as Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG911) to allow photos, videos and text messages to flow seamlessly from the public to the 9-1-1 network.

While the technology to implement these new IP-based 9-1-1 systems is available now, the collective transition to NG911 in states and counties nationwide will require the support, coordination and dedicated resources from legislative and governing entities, in keeping with the Next Generation 9-1-1 Act of 2019.

It is clear within the 9-1-1 industry that this more robust, mobile- and digitally adapted system will revolutionize how the public can communicate in emergencies thereby creating a greater degree of public safety across the nation. Richer and potentially real-time information shared with first responders through the First Net network would be a critical improvement that can ensure that they are better informed and operate more safely, in big cities and in rural communities. In sum, First Net and NG911 are complementary initiatives, and if coordinated, can greatly improve the provision of public safety communications between the public, 9-1-1 and first responders.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony regarding First Net and the 9-1-1 industry. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have at this time.