

Internet Protocol Transition a Critical Step To Ensuring Public Safety, Say Senate Hearing Witnesses

Broadband Breakfast News By Marcus Hedenberg

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WASHINGTON, June 11, 2014 – Even the quickest and best-designed networks can succumb to Mother Nature when a hurricane or tornado strikes a community. And when thousands of people dial 911 at the same time, modern-day networks simply aren't equipped to handle traffic of such tremendous scale.

That was the message delivered at a Thursday hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, and the Internet. Hurricane Sandy proved this point when thousands of people were left without the means to call for help. But network providers have learned a lot since then as they gear up for the internet protocol transition, testified Gigi Smith, president of the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials.

The subcommittee hearing last week sought to find the best ways to create networks that aren't just fast, but reliable in massive-scale catastrophes.

The need for better technology was especially close to the hearts of people in Arkansas and Mississippi, whose homes were ravaged in April by tornadoes, said Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss.

"Despite the devastation, we can be thankful for the technology that provided critical information ahead of time, alerting people to take shelter and save hundreds of fellow citizens," Wicker said. "The swift action of our weather forecasters, local officials, and first responders validated the importance of technology and communication when disaster strikes."

But still it's not enough, Wicker said. Communications networks are being modernized. The switch from existing copper telephone line infrastructure to high-speed fiber and wireless broadband "is expected to maximize the benefit of IP broadband networks to all Americans." Next generation 911 services, robust data transfers, and more efficient voice services are all part of the IP transition's end goal.

The move to modern broadband networks holds “great promise” for quicker communications and reliable networks, said US Telecom Association Senior Vice President Jonathan Banks. The transition isn’t a matter of “if,” but “how” to best manage the upgrades.

Ninety-two percent of the population have access to “robust wireline infrastructure” and 99 percent have access to mobile service, Banks said. But with so many people being able to use the same networks, modern IP-based networks need to brace themselves for large-scale emergency traffic. Anyone should be able to reach first responders and dispatchers immediately and reliably.

“The rollout of IP networks will involve multiple components serviced by multiple companies, which will require a new level of coordination and associated procedures to ensure rapid service restoration,” said Smith of APCO International, the public safety group. “Response plans should include appropriate priority for public safety communications.”

“IP-based networks, when properly designed and implemented, should be both logically and physically redundant,” Smith said.

Switching from copper to fiber would also yield the benefit of increased durability to certain extreme cases like flooding, said FCC Chief Technology Officer Henning Schulzrinne.

Banks did concede that it’s very challenging to build networks in rural communities inhabited by few people. In many cases, he said, people simply don’t see the value in adoption.

“Ensuring that broadband and mobile networks reach everywhere throughout our country is a goal we must continually strive to meet,” Banks said. “In most rural areas of our country, this will require governmental support because there is no private business case that can support building and operating broadband networks in these areas.”

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