

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-3226

July 21, 2011

Janet Napolitano
Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Secretary Napolitano,

I am writing to express my concern about the urgent need to update the 9-1-1 service system to a nationwide Public Service Broadband Network that will provide comprehensive and uninhibited emergency response. I am particularly interested in the 9-1-1 service's inability to receive text messages, photos, and videos from cell phone users seeking emergency response.

An estimated 70% of the 240 million 9-1-1 calls made annually come from cell phones and adult texting rose from 65% in 2009 to 72% in 2010. Additionally, 2/3 of teens say they're more likely to use their cell phones to text than make a call. It is becoming increasingly evident that 9-1-1 call centers must be updated to accommodate America's most popular communications technology.

Furthermore, many people turn to texting first in a panic situation. During the 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy, multiple students tried to send text messages to 9-1-1, not realizing that emergency call centers could not support such messages. With an emergency response system utilizing 21st century technology, these same teens could have texted information about the shooter to 9-1-1, and responders could have distributed a mass message to cell phones in the area with instructions on emergency procedures. In a life-threatening situation, such as a school shooting, texting and photo/video capabilities at emergency call centers could immediately save lives.

A 9-1-1 service system will not only prove vital in tragedies such as school shootings, but will also aid in a broad spectrum of emergency situations – deaf people would be able to use text messaging to report a crime and receive instructions, store owners could use cell phones as alternatives to panic buttons during a robbery, drivers could be warned of a traffic emergency up ahead, and locals could record weather emergencies via video to be distributed to affected areas. The possibilities for this very intuitive advancement are endless.

Considering that the Congressional goal to create laws streamlining a nationwide emergency response system was incited by the failure of such systems during the September 11th terrorist attacks, I am disappointed that such little progress has taken place in the last decade. In this project, prompt action will increase effectiveness, save money, and, most importantly, save lives. Rapid progress is necessary to utilize the evolving commercial deployment of wireless networks, as current planning efforts are not keeping pace with technological advancements.

In the near future, I'd like to schedule meetings with public safety officials in my district to discuss the feasibility of a pilot plan within Western New York's 26th Congressional District. I would also like to extend an invitation to representatives of your organization for a September 2011 meeting to discuss progress that has been made within your Department and any suggestions you may have for the future generation 9-1-1 service system.

I envision us taking responsibility for something as urgent as emergency response in the form of 9-1-1 calls and integrate this with something as intuitive as 21st century cell phone technology. Please contact me if you are interested in participating in the September meeting, and thank you for your hard work in ensuring the safety of our people.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kathleen C. Hochul". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kathleen Hochul
Member of Congress

CC:

Julius Genachowski, Chairman, Federal Communications Commission

W. Craig Fugate, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency

James M. Sherry, Acting Commissioner, New York State Division of Homeland Security and
Emergency Services

Brian Fontes, Chief Executive Officer, National Emergency Number Association