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## Helping first responders

By Tom Ridge

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When will our first responders get the national communications system they need instead of testimonials, a few bucks and repeated promises of change? The answer: now, if Congress and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) are willing to think and act anew.

In the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, it became clear that many courageous individuals, including firefighters and police officers, died because of failed communication systems that could not deliver evacuation orders, intelligence from colleagues or, most devastating, the news that the South Tower had collapsed.

Nearly five years have elapsed and we don't appear to be any closer to a national broadband solution to the emergency community's critical communications needs. Sadly, when Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast last year and levees broke free, yet another disaster revealed the scope, severity and heart-wrenching signs of disparate, antiquated, and, in some cases, nonexistent, communications capabilities. Emergency responders from different jurisdictions using different radio frequencies couldn't talk to each other. Neither could rescuers in boats who would have benefited enormously if they could have communicated with helicopters hovering aloft. State and local leadership had virtually no way to lead because their communications lines were largely inoperable.

Those are just two examples of a nationwide problem, spelled out vividly last fall in congressional testimony from the Department of Homeland Security. More than 90 percent of the nation's public-safety wireless infrastructure is financed, owned, operated and maintained by more than 60,000 separate, independent local jurisdictions and police, fire and emergency services. Public-safety personnel operate on 10 different frequency bands, and their equipment, sometimes more than 30 years old, is frequently incompatible.

There is an urgent need to fix this problem, and a new opportunity has arisen to allow us to succeed in that attempt. The critical factor is that we must act quickly or the chance to put this solution in place will disappear.

The opportunity comes from spectrum that is being vacated by broadcasters and which is owned by the American people to use as we see fit. That opportunity, awaiting congressional action, exists in the form of a proposal that would allow the FCC to allocate 30 MHz of 700 MHz spectrum to create America's first nationwide broadband public-safety network. The present plan is simply to auction this spectrum to commercial

interests in 2008. If that happens we will have lost our last best chance to give those who risk their lives for us the tools they need both to protect their own lives and ours.

This proposal for a national network has received significant favorable reaction from a number of law-enforcement and public-safety advocates. The available spectrum has unique properties that make it particularly suited to an emergency network. The network would connect all communities -- urban and rural -- in the event of an emergency, and it would have a satellite component so responders could stay in touch even if land-based systems failed. Its signals can travel 30 miles, penetrate walls and be sent and received without a direct line of sight.

It would work -- and rid us of an existing disjointed system that is now creating needless danger in disaster situations. It would also give police and firefighters the state-of-the-art emergency communications network they so rightly deserve.

What makes this new idea particularly appealing is the public-private partnership that would make it possible. Under the plan, spectrum capacity leased to commercial operators would fund network infrastructure development and all maintenance. In other words, the need can be met without public money, but public priority would prevail. In fact, public safety would be given first priority on the network, and private interests would gain the right to share this robust network that also serves their business needs.

Using this spectrum in the public interest will allow us to keep our emergency technology current. The alternative is years of deploying multiple, incompatible technologies that will rapidly become obsolete.

While first responders appreciate words of gratitude over the last five years, they would appreciate even more Congress accelerating the development of a national communications system. They would appreciate Congress empowering the FCC to review this plan. It is the least that can be done for those who were not well-served in the past, and the right thing to do for the safety of our citizens and those who put their life on the line every day.

*Tom Ridge served as governor of Pennsylvania and the nation's first secretary of the Homeland Security Department.*