

Acting Chairwoman and Commissioners:

I am grateful for the invitation to participate in this panel. While Harris County was not impacted by Hurricane Ida, we've averaged a Presidential-level disaster declaration every nine months since FEMA was created. In just the last six years, we've experienced three major flood events, including Hurricane Harvey, the first major industrial incidents in 30 years, COVID-19 and, this year, Winter Storm Uri.

Communications is the lynchpin of disasters. Whether this is providing alerts and warning to the public or maintaining the ability to hear from critical partners and stakeholders, we fail when our networks fail. Every moment emergency managers are unable to hear and be heard, lives are in jeopardy.

It is said that people make their own luck. That is no less true of resilience. Resilience is inextricably linked to preparedness and mitigation. It is reflected in the choices we make when we purchase technology, the strategies we create to communicate, and the people we choose to make things happen. From being a key national partner in the FirstNet system that links our first responders, to our efforts to help develop and grow Wireless Emergency Alerts, to developing systems that keep our constituents and stakeholders informed, our choices have predetermined our ability to create successful public safety outcomes.

At the Harris County Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Management, we have developed a strategy that prioritizes putting critical information where the public is accustomed to getting their news. Whether that is the traditional broadcast media or via SMS/Text messages, or social media, our multi-channel communications strategy is the same on blue sky days as it is on gray sky days. By creating a cohesive brand, ReadyHarris has become the go-to place for information on emergency preparedness, mitigation, disaster response, and recovery.

As an emergency management agency, our ability to have an impact, to save lives and property, is grounded in what we are able to learn from residents, and especially our jurisdictions and partners. Harris County has 34 cities and an unincorporated area that includes rural farmland and high density urban areas. It is a very complex political environment with nearly five million residents. Our road to recovery starts with knowing the infrastructure condition in each of our 34 cities. Each day we poll our jurisdictions to create a SWEAT Report - Security, Water, Energy, Accessibility, and Telecommunications. This is granular information allowing us to see the "big picture," anticipate cascading impacts, and stay ahead of the curve. Their priorities become our priorities but we cannot help them alone.

The key element of our emergency response strategy is bringing partners together inside of our Emergency Operations Center. This includes law enforcement, fire service, transportation, utilities, and many more. Facilitating secure, robust, and candid communications is the role emergency management was created to fill. We brief at the 50,000 foot level, to help everyone identify the threats and potential impacts. We help them understand the systemic interdependencies that sustain our community. And then we bring our partners together in smaller groups to solve the problems at tactical level. This is where the SWEAT report helps us define priorities.

For example, we can help transportation departments prioritize clearing road debris so that power and telecom companies can reach downed lines or towers, essentially helping them plan their restoration efforts. Power companies can prioritize restoring communications and connections to critical infrastructure such as water and sewage. This process eventually brings the entire community back on

line. Cooperation and coordination introduces precision into the murkiness of a post-disaster world. But it only happens when we can pull back the curtain and help everyone understand the multitude of complicated structures we all depend on. We've done this in countless disasters.

There are a lot of commonalities between power and telecom providers. We are fortunate to have AT&T and our major power supplier together for most major incidents and disasters. But, we need to do a better job bringing the other telecom providers inside as well. We rarely have a full picture of the regional telecommunications network and that's unfortunate. We need to know more than they are often willing to share – what towers are down, who do they service, and how long it will take to bring them back on line. Without knowing how bad bad really is, our ability to lead a unified response is radically compromised. We've created a big tent for events such as Super Bowl LVI and we need to spend more time building more trust across the telecom spectrum.

I started off by saying that communications is the lynchpin of disasters. That does not always mean a cell phone or a radio. Candid interaction between the people we depend on to keep our society working is vital. During an incident or a disaster, we often hear that information about the communications grid, or some other factor, is proprietary or cannot be disclosed. To be completely frank, the concept of "proprietary" information ends as the disaster starts. Nobody in our EOC is looking for competitive advantage. They're looking to bring their friends, neighbors, and yes their customers, back to something resembling normal.

Winter Storm Uri was the first major disaster since Hurricane Ike in 2008 where Harris County's power grid was compromised. Nearly all of our residents were without power for several days and the downstream impacts included a noticeable degradation in both cellular and data service. Our ability to hear and be heard was severely jeopardized, if temporarily. While we have multiple backups for power and communications, the same cannot be said for residents. It is in our common interest, government and the private sector, to work together and provide the services residents deserve.

I would like to extend my thanks to the FCC for your commitment to improving disaster communications across the country. I am happy to answer any questions that the panel may have.