

STUPAK, EXPERTS URGE LEADERSHIP, FUNDING TO RESOLVE NATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS INTEROPERABILITY CRISIS

Stupak: "Zero, Nothing" Being Done Now to Resolve Interoperability Crisis.

September 14, 2004/Washington, D.C. – Rep. Bart Stupak (D-MI), a member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and co-chair of the U.S. House Law Enforcement Caucus, today joined other experts at a New Millennium Research Council (NMRC) panel presentation in calling on Congress and the Administration to act now on public safety communications interoperability issues.

In the opening remarks, Stupak said: "Despite the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and grant programs for first responders, funding for modernizing the communications systems has fallen far short of the estimated \$18 billion that is needed to make the nation's public safety agencies fully interoperable." He cited as evidence the Administration's federal budget allocations for first responder communications interoperability in the fiscal years 2004 and 2005, which amounts to "zero, nothing."

Rep. Stupak said there needs to be a guaranteed funding stream for communications grants and is pushing legislation to create a communications interoperability trust fund. He called on the Administration and Congress to provide a long-term plan on how to make our nation's public safety agencies all interoperable. "Public safety is not an issue for the Administration and Congress to be dragging its feet," Stupak said. "But here we are three years after 9/11 and we are still at square one."

The NMRC panel event focused attention on the lack of interoperable communications for America's first responders and possible strategies for overcoming this critical public safety issue that was highlighted on September 11, 2001 and has not yet been resolved. "I hope that this debate furthers a better understanding of the key issues and encourages actions that will help first responders better communicate to keep our communities safe," said Allen Hepner, executive director of the NMRC.

David Boyd, director, SAFECOM Program Office, Department of Homeland Security, said, there was "incredible costs" associated with achieving communications interoperability. He cited gateways as a possible solution between different systems and estimated that there is currently \$50-\$60-\$70 billion in the ground that would be difficult and expensive to move.

It's not only a technical issue but one of people and processes, according to William Jenkins, director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues, Government Accountability Office. One issue is defining the role of the federal government and states. "If first responders are considered a national asset, then there needs to buy in from all parties," he said.

Viktor Mayer-Shoenberger, associate professor of public policy, Harvard University Kennedy School of Government noted that there was a "pattern of history loops" where interoperability issues come to the surface during disasters but then nothing is done about them until the next disaster. "We need to get out of that loop" and recognize that organizational, technical, and historical problems are linked, he said. If some of these problems are addressed others might fall away, he added.

“There isn’t a need for another disaster for us to move ahead,” said Ray Steele, director, Center for Information and Communication Sciences, Ball State University. He said there was a window of opportunity to address communications interoperability now. “We need resolve, focus, and discipline” to address the issues head on, he said.

Tom Tolman, program manager and principal investigator, Communications Technology, National Law Enforcement & Corrections Technology Center, University of Denver, said, there were a number of initiatives underway on interoperability but he called on the communications and wireless industries to step in and provide solutions instead of pushing their own proprietary systems.

There also needs to be some focus on the end user and people issues, said Donald Lund, research associate professor and director, Atlas Project, University of New Hampshire. He said first responders need a common nomenclature to talk about communications incident response and that all levels including mutual aid groups and dispatchers needed to be included in the conversation on how to devise a workable system.

George Ake, program manager, Capital Wireless Integrated Network, said, that public-private partnerships should be encouraged because groups needed to come together to solve equipment, funding, planning, and structural issues. He said that the advent of Internet Protocol communications systems will be a big step to resolve some of the technical issues.

Sal DiRaimo, principal engineer, New York State Technology Enterprise Corporation, said, that policymakers needed to encourage all participants to reach agreements on standards issues and minimum requirements for public safety systems. This includes competitive procurement systems that address the basic functionalities required to do the job.

Jon Peha, professor of electrical engineering and public policy, and associate director, Center for Wireless and Broadband Networks, Carnegie Mellon University, said that there needs to be a national strategy to address interoperability problems with input from local agencies throughout the nation. This would include training and funding, he added.

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The New Millennium Research Council (NMRC) is composed of a network of policy experts who develop workable, real-world solutions to the issues and challenges confronting policymakers. Its work has focused primarily in the fields of telecommunications and technology. For more information, please visit: <http://www.newmillenniumresearch.org>.