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ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
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Majority (202) 225–2927
Minority (202) 225–3641

September 23, 2013

The Honorable Lawrence E. Strickling
Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

The Honorable Mignon Clyburn
Acting Chairwoman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Assistant Secretary Strickling and Acting Chairwoman Clyburn:

On September 16, 2013, the nation's capital became the latest site of gun violence when twelve Americans lost their lives during the shooting at the Navy Yard. There are many unanswered questions surrounding last Monday's events, and we want to ask you about one of them: the reports indicating that due to faulty radios, some first responders had to resort to their personal cell phones and "runners" to communicate as the tragedy was unfolding.

If these reports are accurate, this will not be the first time communications difficulties impaired first responders during an emergency. Unfortunately, there have been numerous communications system failures during recent natural disasters and national emergencies, most notably the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

Last year, Congress enacted legislation to address these communication failures. Congress created FirstNet to ensure that first responders from public safety agencies across the country are able to communicate with each other through a common broadband network. Indeed, FirstNet's mission is to prevent exactly the types of communications failures that reportedly occurred at the Navy Yard last week. This horrific incident serves as a further reminder just how critical it is for FirstNet to succeed in its mission.

Much work remains before the FirstNet network is up and running. One important part of this process is learning from past mistakes. We urge you to look closely at what happened at

the Navy Yard to understand what went wrong and how FirstNet can be configured to address these failings. Press reports of the Navy Yard tragedy indicate that some of the radio problems experienced by police and firefighters at the scene -- including inadequate indoor coverage, radio interference caused by fire alarms, and the inability to communicate with non-Navy first responder radio systems -- were known long before the shooting and that little was done to solve these issues.

We urge you to work closely with all federal, regional, and local agencies investigating these concerns. It is imperative that we understand what happened to these communications systems and why. And it is critical that the lessons of this latest tragedy be passed along to FirstNet, so it can design the future network to avoid such communications breakdowns.

We look forward to working with you to address these problems and stand ready to assist if there is a role for Congress. We would appreciate an update on the results of your inquiry by October 21, 2013.

Sincerely,

Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member

Anna G. Eshoo
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on
Communications and
Technology

cc: The Honorable Fred Upton
Chairman

The Honorable Greg Walden
Chairman
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology