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# Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-3214

June 9, 2003

The Honorable Tom Ridge  
Secretary, Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretary Ridge,

I write to inquire about the Homeland Security Department's (DHS) progress in the use of new communications technologies to better inform and guide the public during national emergencies.

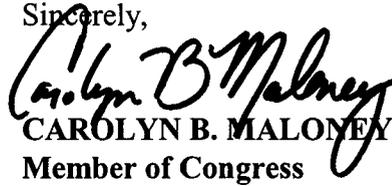
As you know, several modes of communication became unavailable during the September 11<sup>th</sup> disaster, both as a result of destroyed communications systems at the World Trade Center and as a result of the overwhelming use of telephone systems, cell phones, and other wireless networks. Phone traffic increased 1,300% over peak usage in New York City and 400% in Washington, D.C., immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, causing failed connections in about 95% of caller attempts. In addition, thousands of people in New York did not have access to televisions or radio during the disaster, and therefore, had no information about what was happening or guidance on how to proceed.

A failure to upgrade our emergency communications system will jeopardize the quality of future federal responses, because first responders and the public could be blocked, once again, from vitally needed information. Better use of text messaging and other satellite technologies during national emergencies is vital to ensuring that emergency responders have access to all modes of communication during crisis and to provide the public with communications alternatives that prevent entire systems from becoming overburdened. Furthermore, since text messaging technology is already available, DHS should consider establishing a uniform method of communicating with people who may be in transit, outdoors, or otherwise out of contact with traditional communications systems during a national disasters.

I am concerned that DHS may not be taking full advantage of new communications technologies to more thoroughly inform the public during times of national emergency. One case in particular, illustrates cause for concern: Ms. Shelley Spector who works downtown and experienced firsthand the confusion and communications challenges that arise during a disaster, used text messaging to communicate with colleagues and family in the area to inform them of the attacks and to ascertain their safety. Since that time, Ms. Spector informs me that she has developed a cost-effective system for the widespread use of emergency text messaging to the

public during disasters, but even with repeated attempts, she has had difficulty establishing discussions with Homeland Security officials. I hope that your office is making every effort to establish a comprehensive and adequate emergency communications system. Thank you in advance for your prompt consideration of this inquiry.

Sincerely,

  
CAROLYN B. MALONEY  
Member of Congress