

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2005

# **SENATORS COLLINS AND LIEBERMAN INTRODUCE BILL TO HELP IMPROVE COMMUNICATIONS FOR FIRST RESPONDERS**

WASHINGTON, DC— Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Susan Collins and Ranking Member Joseph Lieberman, have introduced legislation to help ensure that our nation's first responders have the most-up-to-date communications systems possible with the ability to communicate with one another during emergencies. The bill would provide \$400 million in grant dollars to states and communities the first year, with gradual increases over the next five years, to assist in the sustainability and compatibility of communications systems. The bill is expected to be considered by the Committee at a business meeting on Thursday.

“One of the many lessons we can take from the Hurricane Katrina disaster is that many communities throughout the nation still do not have the communications infrastructure in place for first responders to communicate with one another during an emergency. We have heard from community leaders throughout the nation that this is a major concern, which should be immediately addressed. Our legislation builds on work that we have done in the past on this matter. It will help ensure that our first responders have effective and interoperable communications systems, which are critical during any emergency,” said

Senators Collins. “This bill takes an important step towards improving emergency communications nationwide so no community experiences the communications failure we saw in parts of the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina,” said Senator Lieberman. “The attack of 9-11 highlighted the problem of interoperability, dramatically showing how vulnerable our first responders are in an emergency when police and firefighters are unable to communicate with each other. Hurricane Katrina spotlighted an even more severe problem – operability – the need for systems that themselves can survive a disaster, either natural or manmade. Katrina has shown us that without a working communications system a coordinated response to an emergency becomes close to impossible. This bill addresses the challenges of both interoperability and operability.” Senators John McCain, R-Ariz., Carl Levin, D-Mich., and Daniel Akaka, D-Hi., are co-sponsors. Collins and Lieberman, who coauthored the intelligence reform legislation last year, pointed out that the 9/11 Commission report cited the inability of emergency responders to communicate with one another as a serious problem. Four years later, and following the worst natural disaster in our nation’s history, communications among emergency responders still have proven to be a problem. The “Assure Emergency and Interoperable Communications for First Responders Act of 2005,” or EICOM Act would provide dedicated funding, strengthen federal leadership and fortify outreach and technical assistance to state and local first responders so that police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical workers can talk to one another across jurisdictional, departmental, and geographic boundaries – even in the wake of a disaster. Specifically, the bill: – establishes an Office for Emergency Communications, Interoperability and Compatibility within the Department of Homeland Security charged with promoting interoperability and finding ways to establish emergency communications capabilities when a terrorist attack or natural disaster has damaged or destroyed usual communications and electrical infrastructure. – directs the Secretary of DHS to establish a comprehensive, competitive research and development program to identify and answer the policy and technology questions necessary to sustain emergency communications capabilities and achieve interoperability – directs the Secretary of DHS to establish at least two pilot projects to help develop and test working emergency communications systems for first responders and government officials that will survive a natural disaster or terrorist attack – establishes a dedicated grant program for states and localities to assist them in developing and implementing emergency and interoperable communications capabilities. Total grant amounts would start at \$400,000,000 for fiscal year 2006, rising to \$1 billion by 2010.

