



**THE POLICE COMMISSIONER  
CITY OF NEW YORK**

September 21, 2016

The Honorable Tom Wheeler  
Chairman  
Federal Communications Commission  
425 12<sup>th</sup> Street SW  
Washington, D.C. 20554  
{Filed Electronically}

**Re: Needed Improvements to the Nation's Wireless Emergency Alert System**

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

On September 17, 2016 New York City was attacked by a terrorist who set off a bomb in our Chelsea neighborhood. The bomb injured 29 people, impacted more than 900 households, and disrupted more than 80 businesses. The New York City Police Department ("NYPD") and our partner agencies immediately responded to secure the scene, tended to the injured, and initiated a major and expansive investigation. Throughout the response and investigation we relied heavily on varied communication systems to keep the public safe and informed.

One of our first tasks was to canvass the area in search of secondary devices that could cause the general public and first responders harm. When a secondary device was, in fact, discovered on West 27<sup>th</sup> Street we needed to quickly alert the hundreds of people in nearby apartments to "shelter in place". NYPD turned to the NYC Emergency Management Department to get the message out via our City's traditional notification system, *Notify NYC*, and via the Wireless Emergency Alert system. A second message was issued once the NYPD Bomb Squad secured the package. While the intended message was only for one block of buildings, there have been reports that people far outside of the targeted area received the message. The lack of granularity with the alert is concerning – we do not want people opting out of the system because they receive messages that are not relevant to them.

Our investigation into the bombing continued through the weekend and by early Monday morning we had a suspect. We had his name, age, physical descriptors, and a photograph. All we needed to do was find him – and find him quickly (other devices were found in nearby Elizabeth, New Jersey over the

weekend). The Emergency Management Department quickly activated their communication channels – including Wireless Emergency Alerts – in hopes of locating the suspect. The suspects name and photograph quickly appeared on social media, news media, via e-mail, and text messages. In contrast, the Wireless Emergency Alert message only contained his name and an instruction to “see media for pic”. With the technology available today the suspects photograph should have immediately appeared on peoples handsets. This is a major gap in the system.

Additionally, the fact that the message is only available in English is another gap that needs to be corrected as soon as possible. There are more than 200 languages spoken in New York City alone, and NYPD takes the issue of language access very seriously. We must be able to issue alerts in multiple languages to ensure those with limited English proficiency receive timely, accurate information.

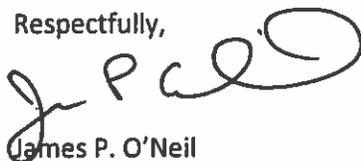
Finally, as NYPD and its partner agencies prepare to respond to the emerging threats of our time we need a mechanism to rapidly collect information from the general public. The Wireless Emergency Alert system should be upgraded to support “Many-to-One” communication where those who receive an alert would be able to provide data back to the City about what they are seeing, hearing, or experiencing around them. This level of public engagement during an emergency would be immensely helpful in ensuring a robust, efficient response.

The Wireless Emergency Alert system has tremendous potential and is a tool that I have every intention of using again when the situation warrants – but it needs to be improved. I strongly urge the Commission to adopt rules that:

1. Require the system to support links and images
2. Improve geo-targeting by leveraging the GPS capability built into today’s mobile phones
3. Supporting multiple languages
4. Integrating many-to-one capability that will allow the public to provide timely, georeferenced information back to the City

I applaud the Commission for working to improve the Wireless Emergency Alert system and strongly urge you to adopt the above recommendations in the upcoming Order without delay. Lives are truly on the line.

Respectfully,



James P. O’Neil  
Police Commissioner