

# The Critical Connection

## How Broadband Enables Public Safety

### A Conversation with Gabe Elias, Statewide Interoperability Coordinator for the Commonwealth of Virginia

During an emergency, access to reliable connectivity can make a lifesaving difference. From powering 9-1-1 systems to enabling coordination during disasters, broadband plays an essential role in helping communities respond effectively to emergencies. As broadband access expands with the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI) and the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program, the Commonwealth is building the foundation for safer, more resilient, and better-connected communities.



Gabe Elias, Statewide Interoperability Coordinator for Virginia, shares his perspective on how connectivity is shaping public safety across Virginia.

#### 1 Can you introduce your role and responsibilities as Statewide Interoperability Coordinator for Virginia?

My position is the Statewide Interoperability Coordinator, or SWIC. Interoperability is our ability to share information across levels of government, disciplines, geographies, and relationships. My role is to help facilitate that work. We operate at the intersection of state agencies, localities, federal partners, and the private sector and volunteers to break down barriers to sharing information and coordinating resources. In Virginia, the SWIC is an employee of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM) and works across the government via direct integration with the Public Safety and Homeland Security Secretariat in the Office of the Governor.

#### 2 Broadband and public safety are not always discussed together. From your perspective, how are they connected?

I remember when broadband, internet access, and connectivity beyond just a radio was considered a “nice to have.” Today, it is not a “nice to have.” It is critical. Broadband is the core of what we do.

Take 9-1-1 as an example. Next Generation 9-1-1 is a priority around the country, and the great news is Virginia has fully implemented it. All of our primary public safety answering points (PSAPs, also known as emergency communications centers, or ECCs) are now connected to the Emergency Services IP Network. That secure network allows telecommunicators to receive not only voice calls, but also text messages, and eventually images and videos, helping them better understand emergencies as they unfold. Using these broadband networks also makes transferring calls between centers easier. That is a huge deal for coordinating help. Broadband for 9-1-1 modernizes the network, enables new features, and adds resilience because IP networks are inherently more flexible than the old way of doing things.

A telecommunicator's job is to take a 9-1-1 call, understand what is happening, determine what resources we need to send, and then coordinate and support that response. Now, when a call arrives at an ECC, they are using computer-aided dispatch systems, records management systems, and external systems which are connected through broadband. Those systems give dispatchers more information to assess an incident, coordinate the right resources, and get those resources out the door. We need robust, high-speed, secure, and reliable connections to do this.

Public safety radio systems are also directly incorporating broadband to expand capability. In 2026, we have radios in many responders' hands that add a 4G or 5G connection to enhance connectivity and interoperability. For example, Virginia's STARS (Statewide Agencies Radio System) utilizes LTE in each of its thousands of handheld radios to enhance radio coverage, share responder locations and mapping, and provide secure connectivity in places where we could not previously communicate. Broadband is helping to enhance and enable situational awareness, coordination, and responder safety in the field.

*For more information on Virginia's deployment of NextGen 911, please visit [NG9-1-1 Deployment / NGSB](#)*

### **3 Are there any stories you could share from your work where access to broadband made a meaningful difference during an emergency situation?**

Recently, Hurricane Helene took out significant connectivity across Southwest Virginia. We had 9-1-1 centers that lost all their connectivity and were not expected to have service restored quickly. Some counties lost all or most of their already limited cellular coverage. However, because this was an emergency that affected some parts of the state and not others, we were able to leverage resources from unaffected areas and push them into Southwest Virginia. We acquired Starlink terminals and deployed technical resources and personnel through local partners, mutual aid, and the Virginia Communications Cache. Together, with direct support in the field from wireless carriers, those resources helped restore baseline connectivity so affected communities could get back online and make and receive calls.

### **4 Can you share more about broadband's role during severe weather events?**

Thinking about a disaster like Helene, broadband is called "lifeline connectivity" for a reason. It allows someone to call for help, tell family members they are safe, or contact a doctor because medication was lost during a disaster. We are all dependent on someone or something, and accessing them often requires connectivity.

Connectivity is also essential to emergency response operations. The faster we can share information, the faster we can get aid to people. At the end of the day, connectivity helps bridge the gap between somebody who has been impacted by a disaster and the resources they need to begin recovery.

### **5 What other ways does broadband impact first responders and emergency responses?**

Both FCC and the national wireless carriers acknowledge the importance of broadband connectivity during disasters. We see this through efforts like the Mandatory Disaster Response Initiative (MDRI).

When connectivity goes down due to hurricanes or ice storms, MDRI enables wireless carriers and the FCC to work together to establish roaming that would not normally happen. For example, during Helene, there was a point where one wireless carrier was carrying the traffic for all three major carriers via the one remaining operational cell site in a town. That is a big deal because that kind of cooperation makes a significant difference during an emergency.

Connectivity also supports tools used to protect first responders. For example, firefighters rely on environmental body sensors utilizing broadband wireless. These sensors communicate location in the event a first responder gets lost, disoriented, or affected to the point that they cannot account for themselves.

Additionally, drone usage is growing quickly, which operates on broadband wireless connections. Public safety agencies increasingly use drones to provide real-time video, assess conditions, and support emergency response. At the same time, unauthorized drone usage is also a rising concern. Agencies need to know what is operating in the airspace and how to respond when an unauthorized aircraft presents a real threat. That requires agencies to exchange secure information quickly and coordinate across jurisdictions. That is a huge broadband challenge as we build up this function at the state and local level.

## 6 What is one thing you wish every Virginian understood about the role broadband plays in keeping people safe?

Know that all of us take this seriously. Your connectivity is not an afterthought. We call it a lifeline because we recognize how important it is. We recognize the ongoing need to expand connectivity to allow not only our emergency response and recovery personnel to connect, but also the people living in those impacted areas. The state, emergency response community, and public safety community understand that broadband is not just about public safety. Broadband enables the public's safety.

*Gabe Elias is the Statewide Interoperability Coordinator (SWIC) for the Commonwealth of Virginia. He advocates for collaboration and coordination across the emergency communications ecosystem, including operational communications, data sharing, alerts and warnings, and 9-1-1. As SWIC, he provides connectivity between multiple regional, state, and federal governing bodies and committees working in the communications discipline. Prior to this role, he served for over 20 years managing technology, projects, and systems staff at the Charlottesville - UVA - Albemarle County Emergency Communications Center. He is a past president of the Virginia Chapter of APCO International.*



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