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network for public safety officers.

"This is just another reminder that it's very real," Kirkendall said. He said it's important that first responders be able to transmit images of injuries and property damage, something that would have been difficult on Tuesday.

A stronger public safety communication network was recommended by the Sept. 11 commission, which in the months after the attacks called for "expedited and increased assignment of radio spectrum for public safety purposes." The commission noted that "the inability to communicate" was a critical problem after the Sept. 11 strikes.

While advances have been made in radio, public safety officials have pressed for improved wireless services. That effort, though, has run into political and practical hurdles in Washington.

The FCC had been working on a proposal to auction airwaves to a commercial carrier for public safety purposes, but the agency hasn't found a qualified bidder and public safety groups strongly object. Groups like the PSA instead want the federal government to simply allocate part of the wireless spectrum for public safety.

One such proposal, by Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Sen. [Jay Rockefeller](#), W-Va., has already cleared out of committee.

"We would still like to see that bill on the floor of the Senate before 9/11," Kirkendall said.

But Congress is on recess, and its agenda upon return is likely to fill up fast with economy-related items. Plus, Kirkendall noted some in the House of Representatives have reservations.

Critics of allocating the spectrum note that an auction would raise needed money for the Treasury. Additional spectrum has also been allocated for public safety purposes since 2001, but Kirkendall said they need more.

Public safety officials were not complaining about the jammed wireless lines on Tuesday. FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate said that first responders could still use email and portable radios. He said congestion on wireless networks is anticipated when so many people at once are using cell phones. Fugate said families need to have a backup communication plan in the event of an emergency.

Dan Schmidt, a spokesman with the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department in northern Virginia, said the department used radio despite the "cellphone capacity issues."

"Our radio systems were fine," he said.

Still, he said, "anything we can do to improve emergency communication for first responders is something we totally support."

The FCC is working on another plan, called Next Generation 9-1-1, to improve communication for emergency responders. Another FCC plan established a system to allow mobile device users to receive targeted text messages about safety threats.

Meanwhile, spotty cell coverage triggered criticism from a competing generation of communication.

"Policymakers debating spectrum policy ought to take note that the one reliable communications service during today's earthquake was the original wireless technology -- free and local broadcasting," Dennis Wharton, vice president of the National Association of Broadcasters, said in a statement. "It's easy to get dazzled by iPads and [Smartphones](#), but all the spectrum in the world won't ensure reliability of the 'one-to-one' cellphone network architecture during an emergency."

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