



PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
**Jumaane D. Williams**

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**TESTIMONY OF PUBLIC ADVOCATE JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS  
TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY AND  
COMMITTEE ON FIRE & EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT - HEARING  
SEPTEMBER 8, 2020**

Good morning,

My name is Jumaane D. Williams, and I am the Public Advocate for the City of New York. I would like to thank the Committee on Technology Chair Robert Holden and Committee on Fire & Emergency Management Chair Joe Borelli for holding this important hearing on 311 and 911 systems in response to Tropical Storm Isaias.

Tropical Storm Isaias highlights ongoing issues when responding to severe weather. There were downed trees, power outages, and some flooding throughout the City. When reviewing 311 data, there were about 48.5 million requests from August 3rd to August 5th. Notably, 34.6 percent, or about 16.8 million, of requests or complaints, were from Queens, while 27 percent, or nearly 13.2 million, were from Brooklyn. The vast majority contacted 311 because of a downed or damaged tree. Yet not everyone had their concerns addressed as seen with downed trees and branches in our streets days after Isaias passed.

The aftermath of the storm should serve as another reminder of the vulnerability of our City's infrastructure and the need for more robust responses to climate change. While it may have occurred in 2012, Hurricane Sandy caused high water levels not seen in 300 years. Eight years later, Isaias reminds us that climate change will severely impact our City and permanently change our lives if we do not rethink our digital and physical infrastructure. Tropical Storm Isaias, while a tropical storm, led the Governor to declare a state of emergency. Just imagine if we had another hurricane far stronger than what we saw in early August.

New Yorkers, in response to what they saw in their neighborhoods from Isaias, called 311 and 911 lines. Unfortunately, it did not appear our systems were prepared for these calls. At the height of the storm, 311 received at least 100,000 calls from residents. Some people could not get through to an operator. It reminds me of when our systems could not keep up with the amount of calls during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Once again, we are reminded that what we have now is not enough. I welcome the administration today to explain the next steps on bolstering our systems.



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In addition, I would like to hear more on the rollout of text-to-911. Specifically, how many people texted 911 amid the storm and after it passed? We have not heard much from the City since it launched in June, and I believe that this tool should be constantly reviewed especially after several delays in its launch. It is vital for people with disabilities and provides another way to get in contact with 911.

I also applaud the legislation before the Committees today, and I support it to ensure we have a better understanding of these calls and requests. A visual map would help improve the accuracy of calls and complaints. The automatically updated database from 311 is missing some locations such as the borough or latitude and longitude. Therefore, this legislation would improve the precision of service requests and complaints. My only recommendation for the administration is to make sure the web portal accommodates people with disabilities to ensure this population is not forgotten about as seen in previous crises.

As part of the conversation for an effective response, environmental justice should be the City's absolute priority. We know all too well who bears the brunt of climate change: communities of more color. If we do not prioritize these communities, then I fear we will leave out the most vulnerable during future crises and natural disasters.

Overall, the topic of how our 311 and 911 systems fared amid Tropical Storm Isaias is important. We cannot forget the challenges facing our City, and the reminder that we must prepare for even greater threats in the future. COVID-19 and Tropical Storm Isaias are examples of this. This year shows us the consequences of being ill-prepared, and we must learn from those lessons to move forward. I thank both chairs for allowing me to speak today, and I welcome testimony from the administration.