FirstNet and the Fire Service

WHAT IS THE FIRST RESPONDER NETWORK AUTHORITY (FIRSTNET)?

FirstNet is an independent authority within the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration. FirstNet is governed by a 15-member Board consisting of the Attorney General of the United States, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and 12 members appointed by the Secretary of Commerce. The FirstNet Board is composed of representatives from public safety; local, state and federal government; and the wireless industry.

Signed into law on February 22, 2012, the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act created FirstNet. The law gives FirstNet the duty to build, operate and maintain the first high-speed, nationwide wireless broadband network dedicated to public safety entities. FirstNet will provide a single interoperable platform for public safety communications.

WHAT WILL BE POSSIBLE WITH THE FIRSTNET NETWORK?

The FirstNet network will enable faster, better coordinated response to natural and manmade disasters. Just as smartphones have changed personal lives, FirstNet devices and applications will ultimately change the way career firefighters and volunteers operate. Imagine a day when one interoperable communications network can be used to dispatch an extrication team, a medical helicopter, police and EMS personnel from different jurisdictions all at the same time. Fire personnel using the FirstNet network will be able to share images and applications, and access databases to have a common operational picture as incidents unfold.

FirstNet's goal is to provide public safety-grade reliability and extensive coverage so fire personnel can count on the network when they are on the job. FirstNet is also aiming to provide coverage solutions that let fire personnel "take the network along" to their destination in certain geographies. Incident commanders and local officials will have local control over the network so, for example, they can assign users and talk groups and determine who can access applications.

When the FirstNet network launches, it will provide mission-critical, high-speed data services to supplement the voice capabilities of today's Land Mobile Radio (LMR) networks. Initially, the FirstNet network will be used for sending data, video, images and text. The FirstNet network will also carry location information and eventually support streaming video. FirstNet plans to offer cellular voice communications such as Voice over Long Term Evolution (VoLTE) or other alternatives.

WHY WAS FIRSTNET CREATED?

The public safety community fought hard to fulfill the 9/11 Commission's last standing recommendation and lobbied Congress to pass legislation establishing a dedicated, reliable network for advanced data communications nationwide. During emergencies, fire personnel need priority access and preemption, which are not available on commercial networks.

HOW WILL THE FIRSTNET NETWORK BENEFIT THE FIRE SERVICE?

Using the FirstNet network will greatly improve situational awareness and keep fire personnel safer with an improved communications capability. The FirstNet network will make it possible to gain quick access to new tools and applications that provide location data and other vital information for firefighting. The FirstNet network will enable the exchange of real-time data and audio/video feeds on the fireground to assist incident commanders with operational decision-making and maximize search and rescue and suppression effectiveness.

WHAT WILL USERS PAY FOR FIRSTNET'S SERVICES?

FirstNet intends to offer services at a compelling and competitive cost to attract millions of public safety users and make FirstNet self-sustaining. The use of FirstNet's services and applications will be voluntary. The costs for FirstNet's services and devices have not yet been set.

HOW CAN MY LOCAL AGENCY PARTICIPATE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIRSTNET NETWORK?

FirstNet is responsible for working through the designated State Single Points of Contact (SPOC) to consult with states, local communities, tribal governments, and first responders to gather requirements for developing its network deployment plans. Fire personnel can provide input to FirstNet via the outreach efforts coordinated by the SPOC in each state. To identify the SPOC for a state and let them know you are interested, go to http://firstnet.gov/consultation. Fire personnel may also want to contact members of the FirstNet Public Safety Advisory Committee (PSAC) and participate in outreach discussions at professional association meetings and conferences. More information regarding the PSAC and its membership is available at http://firstnet.gov/about/public-safety-advisory-committee. To stay up-to-date on FirstNet activities, fire personnel can track progress at www.firstnet.gov.

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