



Public Safety Communications in the United States

Statement of

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Good morning, Chairman Hudson, Vice Chairman Allen, Ranking Member Matsui, Chairman Guthrie, Vice Chairman Dunn and Ranking Member Pallone. I am Fire Chief Steven A. Locke, CFO, EFO, Fire Chief and Deputy City Manager of South Burlington, Vermont, and First Vice President of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). For over 150 years, the IAFC has been at the forefront of leading the charge to strengthen public safety communications. I appreciate the opportunity today to discuss the importance of effective public safety communications for fire and EMS departments' mission-critical lifesaving everyday work.

The IAFC represents the leadership of over 1.1 million firefighters and emergency responders. IAFC members are the world's leading experts in firefighting, emergency medical services, terrorism response, hazardous materials (hazmat) incidents, wildland fire suppression, natural disasters, search and rescue, and public-safety policy. Since 1873, the IAFC has provided a forum for its members to exchange ideas, develop best practices, participate in executive training, and discover diverse products and services available to first responders.

America's fire and emergency service is an all-hazards response force that is locally situated, staffed, trained, and equipped to respond to all types of emergencies. There are approximately 1.1 million men and women in the fire and emergency service – consisting of approximately 300,000 career firefighters and 800,000 volunteer firefighters – serving in over 30,000 fire departments around the nation. They are trained to respond to all hazards ranging from earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods to acts of terrorism, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescues, fires, and medical emergencies. We usually are the first at the scene of a disaster and the last to leave.

The 1990s and 2000s: Public Safety's Communications Struggles Come to the Limelight

The overall need for increased communication and collaboration between public safety tends to enter the spotlight during America's most trying times. At the end of the day, representatives of public safety, when they arrive at an incident scene, just want the ability to communicate with one another. Whether that be members of their same agency, a different agency from close by or far away, we realize that to fulfill our mission critical lifesaving work, we must be able to communicate with one another. Interoperability is the ability of emergency response providers and relevant government officials to communicate across jurisdictions, disciplines, and levels of government as needed and as authorized. The Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma City, OK was one of the first major disasters to highlight the struggles public safety has with interoperability. For example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) activated 11 different urban search and rescue teams. During the response, handwritten notes were passed back and forth from the incident commanders to these FEMA teams.

September 11, 2001, saw the worst incident of terrorism that America has ever faced. Hundreds of first responders lost their lives that day due to, among several reasons, the lack of interoperability. In an effort to establish situational awareness, the New York Police Department (NYPD) had helicopters flying over the incident scene. It was evident that over time, that the structural worthiness of the twin towers was compromised. Yet, the NYPD had no means to radio into the Fire Department of New York's first responders who were heading up the tower in

the face of imminent danger. The 9/11 Commission identified the breakdown of communications between two agencies during its investigation of the tragic loss of life on that day.

It has now been twenty years since Hurricane Katrina made landfall and devastated numerous states in our Gulf Coast region. The storm surge witnessed on August 29, 2005, practically destroyed the coastal regions of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. In total, about 1,836 deaths spread out between seven states were left in this storm's wake. The response to Hurricane Katrina's aftermath was, and still is, unprecedented. It involved tens of thousands of people trying to save the stricken residents of the impacted states. However, the lack of interoperable communications was staggering. The sheer strength and veracity of this storm knocked out entire communications networks all together, not just a cell site or two. It is not difficult to draw a comparison between lack of a resilient, interoperable communications network and the loss of life. Thankfully, in 2012, the United States Congress provided a solution.

Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network

The above-mentioned incidents highlighted the need for first responders to have their own interoperable communications network, including broadband access for data. Regardless of whether they come from a local, state, federal or otherwise, when times get tough, public safety agencies needed a way to communicate with one another. Thus, the idea of a Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network (NPSBN) was conceived. In 2012, Congress passed the Middle-Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act (P.L. 112-96), which created the federal FirstNet Authority. Most importantly, for the first time ever, 20 MHz of radio spectrum was dedicated strictly for the use of public safety. The NPSBN uses what is known as the 700 MHz (Band 14) of radio spectrum. Because of this exclusive spectrum dedicated to public safety, the NPSBN is able to provide public safety with priority and ruthless preemption on their own dedicated spectrum.

For the NPSBN to be a success, it needed the states to support its development and deployment. After Congress passed the legislation, it either required the opt-in of all 56 states and territories of the United States, or each state and territory needed to stand up their own version of the NPSBN. Recognizing the importance of a truly national public safety communications system, the leadership of all 57 states and territories opted into the deployment of the NPSBN.

Creation and Composition of the Federal FirstNet Authority

As part of the 2012 enacting law for the NPSBN, Congress created the First Responder Network Authority (federal FirstNet Authority). This law created an independent federal agency and tasked it with ensuring that the management of the buildout and deployment of this network was done with proper coordination and oversight. The FirstNet Authority is essential to the overall operation of the NPSBN. One of its main responsibilities is to coordinate with local, state, tribal and federal stakeholders to ensure that the network being built for public safety was going to meet the needs of public safety. For example, fire, law enforcement, emergency medical services (EMS) and 9-1-1 call center personnel are represented on the FirstNet Authority Board. Additionally, the Public Safety Advisory Committee (PSAC) provides guidance about public

safety's needs and unique requirements. These groups are the backbone when it comes to governing the NPSBN.

The FirstNet Authority's Public Safety Advisory Committee (PSAC) is composed of over 40 different representatives from various disciplines of public safety, combined with representatives of local, state, tribal, territorial, and federal agencies. This group represents the different facets of public safety who continuously provide feedback and suggestions about how to improve the NPSBN. The FirstNet PSAC ensures that the needs of the public safety end-users are being listened to, and the FirstNet Authority fulfills their mission. At the end of the day, due to this unique public-private partnership, the network operator is not in the driver's seat. Rather, it is public safety as represented by their delegates to the PSAC.

Another important group that contributes to the operations of FirstNet is the independent FirstNet Authority Board. They are also comprised of prominent leaders from not just in public safety, but they also represent local, state, tribal, and federal government entities. The IAFC is proud to have had numerous former Presidents and Board Chairs serve on the FirstNet Authority Board. Currently, our President and Board Chair, Fire Chief Trisha L. Wolford, who is the fire chief of Anne Arundel County in Maryland, serves on the FirstNet Authority Board. These select individuals, appointed by Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Communications and Information work to ensure that the needs of public safety are fulfilled by the FirstNet Authority.

Public Safety Features Unique to FirstNet

Often, when disaster strikes, cellular communication networks can become overloaded both with public users on the scene trying to obtain information, and those from afar who are trying to obtain details. Downed power lines, damaged cell sites, or even possible complete loss of service also can result from a disaster. Before FirstNet, these issues plagued the public safety agencies' communications. Now, the FirstNet Authority supports a resilient network for reliable public safety communications during a disaster or emergency.

Priority access and ruthless preemption are two of the key tools first responders utilize to save lives. Due to FirstNet's unique set up, this means that public safety users and agencies have priority over commercial users on the network, which ensures that public safety's communications operations are not disturbed or throttled during emergencies. Ruthless preemption ensures that public safety communications are sent reliably during disasters and emergencies. Having this preemption feature always active and always ready for use by public safety is critical to our work. For priority and ruthless preemption to be successful for public safety, it requires a dedicated network core.

The FirstNet core supports the first and only nationwide system that ensures that public safety communications are prioritized and have ruthless preemption. This system ensures that commercial and public safety communications traffic stay separated. It also provides security, deterring bad actors from interfering with public safety communications. Updates to the core itself along with its infrastructure are driven by the FirstNet Authority Board and the PSAC. A standalone network core is key to delivering first responders the reliable communications that they deserve.

A benefit to the FirstNet Authority is the automatic oversight obligations. The current governance structure makes sure first responders sit at the head of the table when it comes to decision-making. For example, fire, law enforcement, EMS and 9-1-1 call center personnel are represented on the FirstNet Authority Board. Additionally, the PSAC provides guidance about public safety's needs and unique requirements. The end users are the ones driving direction of this network. Also, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA); the Department of Commerce's Office of Inspector General (OIG); the Government Accountability Office; and Congress provide further oversight to ensure that FirstNet meets its goals – a level of oversight and accountability that no other carrier can claim. After a thorough open review process, in 2023, the Federal Communications Commission granted a license renewal to the FirstNet Authority for another 10 years.

Recently, the OIG released reports pointing to some areas of improvement in operations for the FirstNet Authority. The IAFC believes this is a necessary step in order to improve the FirstNet Authority's operations for public safety. Most importantly, the IAFC appreciates the OIG's work to ensure that the American taxpayers' hard-earned money is being used in a responsible manner.

The End Users and Examples of FirstNet in Action

The primary users of FirstNet are comprised of public safety representatives from the fire service, law enforcement, EMS, city managers, emergency managers, mayors, government officials, and even Members of Congress. A common misconception is that the NPSBN is just for first responders. Rather, it also supports an entire response ecosystem all tasked with serving the public in a disaster or emergency. Some examples of FirstNet's secondary users are hospitals and healthcare facilities, public utilities along with power linemen, colleges and universities, public and private schools. All of these facets of public safety now rely upon FirstNet to deliver interoperable communications.

Since the inception and deployment of the FirstNet Authority and the NPSBN, FirstNet has been on the scene to countless incidents. From a school shooting to wildfire response, from an 80,000+ attendee Taylor Swift concert to the communities and states affected by hurricanes, FirstNet stands at the ready to support public safety. The network also is supported by a dedicated fleet of various deployable assets which can be used to ensure FirstNet's operations when communications are down.

Here are some recent examples of major FirstNet asset deployments:

- Major wildfire responses, such as those experienced in Los Angeles, CA in early 2025 and New Mexico in 2024.
- Responding to the landfall and aftermath of Hurricanes Milton and Helene in 2024; Idalia in 2023; Ian in 2022; Ida in 2021; and Isaias, Laura, Sally, Delta, and Zeta in 2020.
- Sporadic tornado incidents like those experienced in St. Louis, Missouri in 2025; in Oklahoma in 2024; and Perryton, TX in 2023.

- Various winter storms like Blair and Cora in 2025.
- The 2023 solar eclipse event, which affected numerous states, counties, and cities. FirstNet's operations ensured that areas typically not visited by many citizens were ready to support any challenges they faced.

Short response times are essential when it comes to supporting 9-1-1 calls, especially those dealing with EMS. In 2023, the State of Tennessee became the first state to utilize FirstNet as a backup measure to supplement all of its 9-1-1 call dispatch centers. In 2024, the response to Hurricane Helene saw FirstNet being used to support North Carolina's 9-1-1 dispatch centers. In 2025, areas in Texas experiencing disaster due to flooding utilized FirstNet to support their 9-1-1 dispatch centers.

Removal of the Sunset Provision for the FirstNet Authority

One provision found within the FirstNet Authority's enacting statute is a sunset provision. This was inserted due to the uncertainty of the success of the NPSBN. When Congress created FirstNet, supporters and detractors were unsure of how many users would ultimately utilize these tools for public safety communications. Now, in 2025, those concerns no longer exist. Over 30,500 different public safety agencies utilize FirstNet and the NPSBN using over 1,000 unique devices and deployables that help enhance public safety communications.

In February 2022, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report, [Public-Safety Broadband Network: Congressional Action Required to Ensure Network Continuity \(GAO-22-104915\)](#). This report found that if Congress does not act, the continued operation of the NPSBN would be jeopardized and could result in significant disruption for first responders who rely on the network for emergency responses.

Congress must remove the sunset provision. If Congress does not remove the sunset date for the FirstNet Authority, the GAO reported that public safety may lose both its network and its ability to oversee the FirstNet network and guide its future evolution. In addition, innovation in public safety communications could be stifled if FirstNet's vendors decide network uncertainty is not worth them investing the time, money, and effort to develop new solutions for public safety communications. The following organizations all ask Congress to preserve the federal FirstNet Authority by removing the February 22, 2027, sunset date:

- International Association of Fire Chiefs
- National Fraternal Order of Police
- International Association of Chiefs of Police
- International Association of Fire Fighters
- National Volunteer Fire Council
- United States Conference of Mayors
- International Association of Emergency Managers
- Congressional Fire Services Institute
- National Emergency Management Association

- Major County Sheriffs of America
- National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
- National League of Cities
- National Association of Counties
- National Association of Black Law Enforcement Executives
- National Fire Protection Association
- National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians
- International City/County Management Association
- National Governors Association
- APCO International

A Nationwide Transition to Next Generation 9-1-1 Services is Long Overdue

The IAFC is proud to have been involved in the first ever 9-1-1 call in Haleyville, Alabama in February 1968. This event altered the future of public safety communications. As we have seen, technology has begun to surpass the capabilities of the services that legacy 9-1-1 systems provide. The majority of people with a cell phone can text, send pictures, transmit data, and use other means to communicate with one another. Yet, thousands of 9-1-1 centers across America do not have the ability to receive this information. Some even still rely upon technology from around the time that the first 9-1-1 call was made.

American citizens are sorely in need of support to help facilitate the nationwide transition to Next Generation 9-1-1 (NG 9-1-1). The IAFC asks that Congress pass comprehensive legislation to fund the nationwide NG 9-1-1 transition. The transition to NG 9-1-1 will allow fire and EMS departments to receive critical data, including location of a patient, video from a fire, or the details of a crash seamlessly from the people on scene. This transition will result in more effective responses to incidents with the goal of saving lives and providing better service.

The Importance of Maintaining AM Radio in Vehicles

Even with all the technological advancements that we have seen recently with public safety communications, redundancy is key. AM Radio continues to be a dependable means of alerting the public when threats are approaching their community. The resilience and simplicity of AM Radio cannot be understated. A proven example of the usefulness of AM radio was seen in 2024 in North Carolina during the landfall of Hurricane Helene. During this time, in Asheville, NC, AM radio operators from station WWNC stayed on the air to ensure their listeners and community stayed informed as the event unfolded. AM radio provided crucial evacuation and shelter information to citizens when other public communications networks were inoperable.

However, there has been a push from auto manufacturers to remove AM Radio from new vehicles as a free, standard service. Without a doubt, this action has the potential to hinder the delivery of lifesaving operations during times of crisis. As we saw in Asheville during Hurricane Helene, AM radio can be used to ensure that public safety communications do not have a single point of failure before, during, and after the storm. These brave heroic AM Radio operators also relayed information during the recovery phase, ensuring the public knew where to go for support. The AM Radio for Every Vehicle Act of 2025 (H.R. 979/S. 315) offers a commonsense solution.

We look forward to working with the House Energy and Commerce Committee to pass this legislation and ensure that the American public receive critical lifesaving information during major emergencies and disasters.

Conclusion

I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to address public safety communications in the United States. The IAFC, along with its many supporting organizations and associations, ask Congress to preserve the federal FirstNet Authority by removing the sunset date. FirstNet is the only service that can provide first responders with priority access and ruthless preemption, on its own dedicated network core with governance established by federal statute. No other telecommunications offering or network provides first responders with these mission critical life-saving tools.

We also ask Congress to take other steps to protect the public. For example, we look forward to working with the committee to pass legislation to upgrade the nation's 9-1-1 system by funding the nationwide transition to an interoperable NG 9-1-1 system. This upgrade will improve the emergency response that local public safety agencies provide to their citizens in need. We also ask Congress to pass commonsense legislation to retain AM radios in cars, so that Americans have access to lifesaving information during disasters and emergencies.

I thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for today's hearing. The IAFC looks forward to working with the committee to ensure that public safety has all the communications tools necessary, on their own dedicated network, with ruthless priority and preemption, on a dedicated core, with oversight in federal statute ensuring the FirstNet Authority can be the best it can be.