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Hearing: “An Evaluation of FirstNet’s Progress”

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Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, Innovation and the Internet**

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Thank you, Chairman Thune, Ranking Member Schatz, and Members of the Committee.

I am Jason Porter, the Senior Vice President leading the FirstNet program at AT&T. I appreciate the opportunity to update the Subcommittee on the critical role the nationwide public safety broadband network (“FirstNet”) is playing in connecting first responders across jurisdictions and disciplines to enable a unified emergency response during the unprecedented coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Built in partnership by AT&T and the First Responder Network Authority (“FirstNet Authority”), FirstNet is delivering on Congress’s vision of a single, dedicated, nationwide public safety network, providing first responders with the modern capabilities, broad coverage, and robust capacity they need to combat one of the greatest challenges of our time.

FirstNet’s COVID-19 Response

The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the need for a nationwide, high-speed communications platform dedicated to first responders – which include health care workers battling the pandemic on the front lines. FirstNet has answered the call.

To begin with, FirstNet is providing critical connectivity to support telehealth services, including remote patient monitoring for at-risk patients in their homes. FirstNet has also met the communications needs and supported the operations of first responders, doctors, nurses and

public health workers at quarantine locations, testing sites, health care facilities and field hospitals. In coordination with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (“FEMA”) and state, local and tribal emergency operations centers, we performed nearly 5,000 COVID-19 related operational location assessments, including an evaluation of sites being considered for the staging of COVID-19 field hospitals. The FirstNet network performed as intended, allowing first responders to maintain reliable connectivity even with the massive increase in consumer mobility usage during these unprecedented times.

In those rare cases where additional coverage and capacity was needed, we promptly responded to COVID-19 first responder requests with FirstNet’s fleet of dedicated deployable network assets or other innovative connectivity solutions to boost connectivity. These efforts included augmented coverage for medical staff aboard the U.S. Naval Ship Mercy in Los Angeles and the U.S. Naval Ship Comfort in New York. We also deployed two FirstNet SatCOLTs (cell towers on wheels) that supported the Navajo Nation’s COVID-19 response, supplementing connectivity for tribal first responders and FEMA, as well as a FirstNet SatCOLT that boosted connectivity for the tribal emergency operations center on the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation in Keller, Washington.

FirstNet also enabled the City of Alexandria, Virginia, a FirstNet subscriber, to use hotspots and smartphones powered by FirstNet to enable 9-1-1 dispatchers to take calls and handle dispatch operations from their homes and remote locations during the pandemic.

FirstNet’s performance during the pandemic has been exceptional, fulfilling Congress’ goal to establish a nationwide network that first responders can rely on when our nation is encountering an unprecedented emergency. I am pleased to report that first responders, our customers, have heralded the network as a “game changer,” describing FirstNet’s “quick action

and network performance” as essential to support “hundreds of public safety personnel actively engaged in response efforts” when “commercial network devices were unable to handle the heavy data transmission needed to adequately communicate” during the pandemic.¹

Recognizing these benefits, first responders are subscribing to FirstNet in strong numbers.

Since the pandemic began, over 450 public safety agencies have joined or expanded their use of FirstNet’s services to support their COVID-19 response efforts.

FirstNet Band 14 Coverage Is Ahead of Schedule

While we are proud of how FirstNet is supporting our first responders in this time of crisis, we are also proud to report that FirstNet’s capabilities are rapidly growing and our nationwide Band 14 coverage is ahead of schedule. When we last briefed the Subcommittee, we had just started our Band 14 build. Today, our nationwide Band 14 coverage build is more than eighty percent (80%) complete and ahead of schedule, and usage has exponentially grown – with more than 13,000 first responder and supporting organizations having subscribed and over 1.5 million FirstNet connections now in service.

FirstNet is now available to the complete ecosystem of first responders, including physicians and nurses and other frontline healthcare workers, in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and five U.S. territories. Leveraging public safety’s Band 14 spectrum and all AT&T LTE bands, FirstNet currently covers more than 2.61 million square miles. Band 14 is nationwide, high-quality spectrum set aside by Congress specifically for FirstNet. With Band 14 deployed in more than 700 markets, we have surpassed 80% of our Band 14 nationwide coverage target – well ahead of schedule. Band 14 is providing a VIP lane for first responders and is at the

¹ https://about.att.com/newsroom/2020/fn_covid_19.html

heart of our success. In an emergency, this band can be cleared and locked just for FirstNet subscribers. That means only those on FirstNet can access Band 14 spectrum, further elevating their connected experience and emergency response. This is unique in the industry and something that first responders will not get anywhere except on the FirstNet network.

FirstNet's Focus on Rural America

FirstNet is for all first responders wherever they are located. That is why reaching rural and remote parts of America is one of our top priorities. Over 1,000 new, purpose-built FirstNet sites are currently planned as part of the initial nationwide FirstNet network expansion. Most of these sites are in rural areas. Thus far we have launched over 250 of these sites across the country – including areas such as: Lusk, Wyoming; Tilghman Island, Maryland; Yamhill County, Oregon; Preston County, West Virginia; Zerkel, Minnesota; the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Reservation in northern Wisconsin; Bethel, Alaska; Michigan's Upper Peninsula; Roswell, New Mexico; Pennington County, South Dakota; Ashland, Montana; Naselle Washington along the Long Beach Peninsula; Lucedale, Mississippi (near the De Soto National Forest); and in northwestern Minnesota, serving the White Earth Reservation. These sites were identified by state and public safety stakeholders as priority locations. Our ongoing network expansion has also enabled communities -- like Pennington County, South Dakota; Village of Linden, Wisconsin; the Oglala Sioux Tribe; and Mammoth Lakes, California -- to modernize their communications and transform their emergency response capabilities.

We are also collaborating with rural network providers across the country to help build out additional LTE coverage and extend FirstNet's reach in rural and tribal communities. For example, one rural provider is adding Band 14 spectrum and AT&T commercial LTE spectrum bands to hundreds of its cellular sites across rural Colorado and Nebraska, as well as select

portions of South Dakota and Wyoming. Similar activities by other rural providers are also taking place in Alaska, Arizona, New Mexico, Wyoming and more to help us extend the reach of the first responder network.

FirstNet Background

As you take stock of FirstNet's success, it is important to remember how and why it began. Congress created FirstNet in the wake of the tragedy of 9/11 and based upon a recommendation in the 9/11 Commission Report because first responders frequently lacked the ability to communicate with each other during emergencies. Prior to FirstNet, first responders relied solely on over 10,000 disparate radio networks for push to talk voice communications to do their job and they used the same commercial wireless networks that we all do for calls, texts, mobile applications and data. Those networks quickly become congested during a significant emergency. We have unfortunately witnessed how these communication challenges hamper first responders, such as in responding to the 9/11 attacks and many other emergencies since.

In response, Congress recognized that we can and should do better to support our first responders and their critical mission. In 2012 Congress established the FirstNet Authority to address the critical problem that the tragic events of September 11, 2001 exposed: namely, different agencies of first responders being unable to communicate effectively because their radios operated on multiple, different networks. To solve this problem, Congress authorized the FirstNet Authority to build, maintain, and operate a single, nationwide, interoperable public safety broadband network dedicated to first responders. The resulting FirstNet network, which AT&T has been both privileged and proud to partner with the FirstNet Authority to execute, is operating precisely as Congress intended. The current pandemic, and the cycles of life- and property-threatening hurricanes, storms, tornadoes and wildfires that have roiled America since

we last appeared before the Subcommittee remind us how important communication is during such events.

The FirstNet Authority and AT&T offer the only nationwide, high-speed broadband communications platform dedicated to and purpose-built for America's first responders and the extended public safety community. Additionally, FirstNet is unique because the network's buildout and performance is subject to strict contract deliverables and accountability from the FirstNet Authority. Through FirstNet, our nation's first responders are receiving the unthrottled, connectivity and priority communications they need on a highly secure and dedicated platform. This unparalleled highly secure and dedicated platform distinguishes FirstNet — public safety's network — from commercial wireless networks that are not designed to cut through the potential clutter of commercial mobile traffic and that are not subject to oversight by the FirstNet Authority. And it illustrates precisely why public safety fought so hard for the creation of the FirstNet Authority and the deployment of the FirstNet network.

FirstNet Overview

FirstNet is the only dedicated wireless broadband communications ecosystem built for America's first responders, meeting the needs of firefighters, EMS, law enforcement, 9-1-1 centers, and emergency managers, providing:

- **Security.** FirstNet provides a unique, differentiated, and highly secure network platform, encrypted at its dedicated network core.
- **Priority/Preemption.** FirstNet provides its eligible users with priority and, for primary users, pre-emption. "Priority" means just that -- in times of emergencies and network congestion, FirstNet gives first responder communications precedence and, for "primary users," preempts all other communications. And, if an area is hit with an emergency (e.g.,

hurricane, wildfire), a local commander can provide elevated priority to the FirstNet users supporting the response. For example, in a hurricane, a commander could upgrade the priority level of evacuation vehicle operators prior to the storm, then shift priority to the medical personnel and utility workers after the storm passes through.

- **Interoperable.** FirstNet delivers interoperability across public safety agencies and jurisdictions, meaning that they can communicate with each other using a common, highly secure network platform that avoids the congestion that impacts commercial networks in times of emergency. In New York City, for example, FirstNet equipped hundreds of ambulances, EMS and other first responders with a common, interoperable communications platform and dedicated connectivity to help them coordinate the transport of patients between hospitals and health systems across the state. Coordinating with New York public safety agencies, government officials, and city hospitals, the FirstNet team at AT&T provided a cross-agency solution to marshal hundreds of ambulances that came from outside the region into the city to perform mutual aid.
- **Dedicated Customer Service.** Customized customer service with dedicated 24/7/365 security and helpdesk operations support centers just for FirstNet subscribers.
- **Network Disaster Recovery resources.** AT&T supports FirstNet with its FirstNet Response Operations Group (ROG), which serves as public safety's direct partner to meet their connectivity needs, whenever they need it. This group helps to manage the FirstNet-dedicated portable network assets, such as the mobile cell sites that link to FirstNet via satellite and do not rely on commercial power availability. These assets are available free of charge to FirstNet subscribed agencies and include 72 Satellite Cell on Light trucks (SatCOLTS), three Flying Cells on Wings (Flying COWs) and FirstNet One – an

approximately 55-foot blimp, which most recently flew above Cameron Parish, Louisiana to boost connectivity for first responders following the devastation left by Hurricane Laura. FirstNet users are further supported by the hundreds of AT&T commercial deployable assets that are also available to help meet their connectivity needs —when and where they need it. More than 40 sites nationwide house the 72 SatCOLTs dedicated to FirstNet subscribers, enabling a 14-hour delivery window. The assets can be called upon by FirstNet users after a natural disaster has struck and infrastructure has been damaged or when first responders are responding to an emergency incident in a remote location. The deployable program has been a huge success. So far this year, public safety has turned to FirstNet deployable network assets and requested additional support during more than 450 emergencies and planned events – like sporting events, parades and training activities vital to keeping first responders mission-ready. Of these requests, more than 60 requests were related to COVID-19 response operations and more than 50 requests were associated with Hurricane Laura.

- **FirstNet App Ecosystem and FirstNet App Developer Program.** AT&T is bringing 21st Century innovation to first responders. In 2017 we launched the FirstNet App Catalog and Developer Program dedicated to America’s first responders. The catalog now identifies more than 125 highly secure applications tested for public safety that can help cost-effectively enhance their situational awareness and other capabilities. For instance, fire fighters have access to applications that allow them to track the progression of a fire and view a map that shows the location of their team members and other assets. This information can help equip the incident commanders with vital information to help them stage and respond to the fire and help keep their crews and equipment safe. The FirstNet Developer Program encourages developers to design applications with solutions built for the unique

needs of first responders and provides Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) that in turn can support the sharing of information and integration across different mobile applications. It also provides a platform for the first responder community to educate the developer community about their unique needs and priorities. The program thus provides first responders with a one-stop-shop for reliable, highly secure solutions optimized for the FirstNet network platform. Before any app is made available in the App Catalog, the FirstNet Authority and AT&T jointly review the applications for, at a minimum, security, reliability and privacy, giving first responders added confidence that the mobile application performs in critical situations. By pushing innovation to the application level, we are making these innovations readily available to all public safety users, no matter their location or size.

- One particularly successful solution developed and found within the FirstNet App Catalog is FirstNet Push-to-Talk (PTT), the first-ever nationwide mission-critical standards-based push-to-talk solution to launch in the U.S. We tested the FirstNet PTT solution with public safety agencies across the country, including the Cranford Police Department in New Jersey. FirstNet PTT is designed to enable public safety to use their smartphones, feature phones, and specialized ultra-rugged devices like they would use a two-way radio, with highly reliable, high-performance calling. FirstNet PTT will also deliver new features that allow first responders to better react to changing events.
- **Devices.** There are now over 150 FirstNet Ready devices, with Band 14 capability access built in and compatible with the FirstNet SIM card. Devices range from the iOS and Android platforms, ruggedized mobile and in-vehicle devices, and custom designed solutions, such as the built-in “Push-to-Talk” capability on some devices. Critically, the ability for health care

professionals and first responders to disinfect the ruggedized, public safety devices has been helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic. When managing patients and working to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, “mobile hygiene” is top of mind to frontline workers. For instance, the FirstNet Ready Sonim XP8 is ideal for ambulances and those at COVID-19 testing sites due to its resistance to chemicals. The XP8 can be fully submerged and can withstand a variety of different cleaning products from simple soap and water to heavy-duty cleansers and disinfectants, such as bleach and isopropyl alcohol. This is simply another example of the FirstNet ecosystem driving innovation for first responders and delivering solutions that are specifically tailored for their unique needs during difficult circumstances, such as the current pandemic. Together, these capabilities will better connect first responders to the critical information they need both in their routine operations and during an emergency, helping them do their jobs more effectively and efficiently.

FirstNet Is Aiding First Responders in Other Emergency Situations

We take the greatest pride in reporting on how FirstNet is meaningfully serving as a partner to America’s public safety and aiding first responders during large planned events and in emergency situations. In addition to the COVID-19 and other response examples above, I would like to highlight the following for the Subcommittee:

- **Pacific Northwest Wildfires.** The FirstNet ROG and the AT&T network teams are actively supporting FirstNet subscribed agencies responding to the active wildfires in California, Oregon and Washington. We are doing this by: (1) dynamically monitoring the network and carefully tracking where the fires are located, and communicating with the states emergency teams in order to protect critical communications infrastructure; (2) proactively tracking and deploying generators and other assets where there is a brownout, commercial power outage, or disruption due to fire damage; and (3) FirstNet ROG liaisons are providing 24/7 support to FirstNet subscribed agencies in the states. If a FirstNet subscribed agency has connectivity needs, the agency can reach out to its FirstNet Solutions Consultant or the FirstNet Customer CARE (staffed 24x7x365) to submit a FirstNet deployable request. Thus far, since June 2020, we have managed more than 50 deployable requests in the western United States to support emergency response to the wildfires, having deployed assets and other connectivity solutions to support

FirstNet subscribed agencies responding to numerous fires, including the Red Salmon Fire in Willow Creek, California, the El Dorado Fire in Yucaipa, California, the Holiday Farm Fire in Blue River Oregon, the fires in Gates, Oregon, and the Cold Spring Canyon Fire in Bridgeport, Washington.

- **Hurricanes Laura and Sally.** In late August 2020, the FirstNet ROG – led by a team of former first responders – guided the deployment of the dedicated FirstNet fleet based on the needs of public safety in anticipation of Hurricane Laura, the strongest Hurricane to come ashore in Louisiana in two centuries. The team activated FirstNet liaisons to support the affected states’ Emergency Operations Centers. The FirstNet ROG also deployed alongside FEMA’s Urban Search and Rescue management team to provide real-time assessment and triage capabilities in support of the teams on the ground in the hardest hit areas. In addition, AT&T pre-staged assets to support Hurricane Laura response efforts. For Hurricane Sally, the FirstNet ROG staffed Emergency Response Centers and managed deployable requests in Florida, Louisiana and Alabama, including sending assets to Pensacola, Florida, Sulphur, Louisiana, and Robertsdale, Alabama.
- **Tennessee Tornados.** During the devastating early March tornados in Tennessee, Putnam County’s Emergency Operations Center turned to FirstNet to provide critical communications. Within hours, FirstNet deployed dedicated portable network assets, including SatCOLTs to Putnam County, reinforcing communications and allowing first responders to more efficiently and effectively coordinate their efforts. The land mobile radio (LMR) network tower – which is public safety’s traditional two-way radio system – serving Cookeville and the surrounding area was damaged by the storm. In the storm’s immediate aftermath and the days that followed, FirstNet served as the primary line of communications for first responders supporting search and rescue and recovery efforts
- **Hurricane Dorian.** Last year, in 2019, when Hurricane Dorian threatened the east coast, the FirstNet Response Operations Group jumped into action, pre-staging deployable assets and coordinating across dozens of public safety agencies and organizations to provide them with the communications needed before, during and after the storm. FirstNet liaisons provided 24/7 staffing to support Emergency Operations Centers in the affected states, and we were on-site supporting the FEMA National Response Coordination Center. From planning and pre-storm prep to post-storm support, the team was working beside public safety every step of the way.
- **2020 Super Bowl.** We worked with public safety more than a year ahead of the Super Bowl in 2019 and again in 2020 to make public safety-specific preparations, ensuring the FirstNet communications platform was ready. As fans continue breaking data usage records at these major events, first responders using FirstNet do not have to compete with spectators uploading photos and videos from the game.
- **Tribal Search and Rescue.** In the fall of 2018, the Yankton Sioux Tribe Police Department conducted a search and rescue mission for a missing person in a remote area in southeastern South Dakota. The department requested a FirstNet deployable network asset to boost connectivity. Within hours of the request, a FirstNet SatCOLT was in place to help the tribal first responders carry out their operation.

- **Hurricane Florence.** During Hurricane Florence, in 2018, the FirstNet Response Operations Group was ready to support first responders. We deployed a SatCOLT to the staging area in Whiteville, North Carolina to aid emergency response efforts. According to the Director of Emergency Services for Whiteville, they lost their land-based mobile systems in the storm, but when everything was down, FirstNet was working.
- **Hurricane Michael.** Prior to Hurricane Michael, in 2018, we pre-staged network assets along the Gulf Coast for quick deployment, including 32 Cells on Wheels (COWs) and SatCOLTs; 7 Emergency Communications Vehicles and Emergency Communications Portables; and one Hazmat and Mobile Command Center. We received 30 FirstNet deployable requests from FirstNet subscribed public safety agencies. The FirstNet ROG sent assets to the hardest-hit areas to support national guardsmen, airmen, state patrol, trauma care, police, fire and rescue teams from as far away as Oregon. A Flying COW hovered at 200 feet above the ground over Mexico Beach, Florida and provided service to customers and first responders in the surrounding area. Working with then-Florida Governor Rick Scott, we identified public safety agencies that were without commercial service and activated hundreds of FirstNet enabled devices to help these first responders carry out their mission.
- **California Camp Wildfire.** AT&T worked closely with the California Emergency Operations Center regarding the quick moving fires to address the needs of the state and first responders working to contain the Camp Wildfire, then the most destructive and devastating fire in California history. Between FirstNet-requested assets and assets deployed by the AT&T Network Disaster Recovery team, 11 portable cell sites and additional network recovery equipment were deployed throughout the state to support public safety communications and to bring connectivity to affected communities in Northern and Southern California. This included SatCOLTs deployed at locations in Paradise and Oroville, California.

Conclusion

While we are proud of what we've accomplished in a short time, I am even more excited about what the future will bring, as we continue to meet Congress' goal (and our commitment) to give our first responders the advanced communications capabilities that they need to stay connected and help them operate faster, safer and more effectively when lives are on the line.

As the leader of the AT&T team supporting FirstNet, I can assure you that AT&T views FirstNet as much more than a business proposition, it is a core mission. We are honored to be the private partner working together with the FirstNet Authority to make the vision of Congress and the public safety community a reality. Together, the FirstNet Authority and AT&T are delivering a

public safety network and solutions ecosystem that gives first responders what Congress intended: the advanced technology they need to communicate and collaborate nationwide across agencies and jurisdictions during routine operations and emergencies. Supporting first responders is part of our company's DNA. From installing the first telephone at the Chicago Police Department in the late 1800s, to delivering on FirstNet today, we have been the partner to America's first responders for over 140 years. As a former Army officer, I personally view FirstNet as a second opportunity to serve my nation by giving back to the public safety and health care workers who are putting their lives on the line for us every day. I look forward to continuing this important dialogue as FirstNet moves forward. I welcome your questions.