



Three Years Later: Are We Any Closer to a Nationwide Public Safety Wireless Broadband Network?

Statement of

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Good morning Chairman Thune, Ranking Member Nelson, and members of the committee. I am Keith Bryant, fire chief of the Oklahoma City Fire Department, and president and chairman of the board of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). The IAFC represents more than 11,000 leaders of the nation's fire, rescue and emergency medical services. I would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to provide a public safety perspective on the need for a nationwide public safety network and to examine the real progress that the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) has made.

The Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-96) established FirstNet as an independent authority within the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration. Under the act, FirstNet is tasked with building, deploying, and operating a self-funding, sustainable, interoperable broadband network for public safety entities across the country and within U.S. territories.

FirstNet's goal of building the nationwide public safety broadband network to meet the needs of first responders is a matter of critical importance for public safety. While the task will not be easy, the IAFC believes that FirstNet is developing the leadership, staff, and support from states, public safety, and other key stakeholders required to make this network a reality for first responders and the public who call on them for help in their time of need.

As a veteran fire chief, and as a firefighter who has responded to numerous large-scale events including natural disasters and acts of terrorism, I know firsthand the benefits that the FirstNet network stands to offer in terms of improving communications, coordination, and situational awareness during public safety operations. Just as smartphones have changed our personal lives, FirstNet devices and applications ultimately will change the way public safety operates. The ability for a single communications network to be used to dispatch Emergency Medical Services (EMS) personnel, a medical helicopter, fire personnel, and other emergency responders from different jurisdictions all at the same time, while enabling video, text, and data communications at broadband speeds will save critical minutes when it matters most.

As circumstances and technology continue to make our world smaller, situational awareness, real-time information, and data are critical to the safety of America's fire and emergency service and the public we are sworn to protect. In terms of daily operations, America's firefighters deal with an increasingly complex environment that requires ever-increasing amounts of information and data to keep citizens and themselves safe. 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. It 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 fire suppression effectiveness.

The FirstNet network will make a profound change in how EMS is practiced. In the field of EMS, it is important to arrive at the critical-condition patient's location and transport him or her to emergency care at the hospital within minutes. The FirstNet network will facilitate critical decision-making in real time in the field which in turn will help save lives.

Lessons learned from many events throughout the nation tell us that under emergency conditions, the nation's cellular carrier networks quickly become overwhelmed and unusable for transmission of emergency data. We experienced this first hand in Oklahoma City twenty years ago when the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was bombed. The full development of FirstNet's nationwide public safety broadband network will ensure that America's first responders can access vital information under all emergency conditions.

Candidly, I think there was skepticism from some in public safety after FirstNet was formed that our concerns were not being heard initially and that the network would not end up being a mission-critical network. Public safety organizations have consistently said that the network must be mission critical at the outset. Under the leadership of new Chair Sue Swenson, FirstNet has sought greater input from the Public Safety Advisory Committee (PSAC) and engaged with public safety far more than previously. The PSAC is a 40-member committee established by the law creating FirstNet to provide significant recommendations and advice to FirstNet on mission-critical issues. The PSAC meets several times a year, including once this past year near my home town in Norman, Oklahoma.

The PSAC developed and delivered the following documents to FirstNet this past year:

- A Human Factors Report that analyzes the long-range impacts of the network on the way law enforcement, fire, and EMS operate;
- A Potential Users Report that identifies and categorizes lists of potential network users;
- A report containing Use Cases for Interfaces, Applications, and Capabilities that envisions practical examples for how the network will be used.

Recently, the PSAC has been tasked with researching how local incident commanders might use priority and preemption on the network as well as envisioning what types of devices are necessary for public safety personnel in each respective field. We believe public safety's ongoing input through the PSAC is vital at all stages of the network's development so that it will be tailored to the needs of the end users—America's first responders and other public safety entities.

The IAFC and public safety in general are also very pleased with the naming of Chief Jeffrey D. Johnson, former president and chairman of board of the IAFC, as vice-chair of FirstNet. Chief Johnson is well-recognized in the fire and emergency service community as a leader on public safety communications issues.

We believe FirstNet has worked to create opportunities for the public safety community to help shape the design of the network in several states and territories. For instance, FirstNet Board members, including Chair Swenson and executive-level staff, have traveled throughout the country over the past year, reaching out and connecting with local and state public safety officials. This outreach has dramatically improved over the past year and we look forward to it continuing as the network is deployed.

FirstNet's state consultation process is a key element to its success and is a venue where IAFC members and other public safety personnel are able to ensure that FirstNet is meeting our needs.

FirstNet has made tremendous strides with state consultations in the past year conducting more than 100 engagements involving 20,000 stakeholders in Fiscal Year 2014. Many of our members have attended and reported favorably on the FirstNet team's engagement in their respective states and territories. FirstNet has met with 16 states and territories; they have over 20 additional scheduled by the end of this summer. The IAFC believes that it is critical that FirstNet continue its nationwide outreach and consultation to ensure coordination with the public safety community in urban, rural, and remote locations, including island states and tribal nations. I understand that FirstNet intends to hold consultations with the remaining states and territories by the end of this year.

While there are still gaps in understanding and agreement during these in-person meetings on what the final network will look like, how much it will cost for public safety to use, and the network's exact coverage areas, these are exactly the types of questions that should be – and are being – asked and debated at state consultations throughout the country. Public safety must be included in these conversations and we appreciate FirstNet's engagement with the public safety community over the past year.

Public safety fought hard to establish FirstNet because we knew that we were being left behind compared to the technologies available for personal-use communications. The IAFC, and public safety, are united behind the desire to see FirstNet succeed and we will continue to fight for public safety's access to the best available technology to keep the public safe.

We realize there is still a lot of work to be done and FirstNet must continue to move quickly on several key activities in 2015, but collectively, these and other developments from the past year have helped foster a more inclusive, transparent, and productive dialogue between FirstNet and the public safety community. The FirstNet network is urgently needed to increase the safety and capabilities of all public safety personnel and protect the American people. It is not only FirstNet which bears the responsibility of success, but it also falls on all public safety to ensure success in the creation and administration of the broadband network. I feel confident that FirstNet is on the right path toward building a broadband network that will serve the nation's firefighters, EMS providers, and other emergency responders.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.