

BY MARK RYCKMAN, ICMA-CM

GEARING UP FOR FIRSTNET

A nationwide broadband network to ensure public safety

It's been more than 10 years since the 9/11 Commission issued its report that detailed events leading up to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The report identified several failings of the U.S. intelligence community and deficiencies in first-responder systems.

One of the commission's findings was the lack of interoperable communications capabilities for first responders to share mission-critical information during their response efforts. The commission concluded that "Congress should support pending legislation which provides for the expedited and increased assignment of radio spectrum for public-safety purposes. . . ."

Fulfillment of that recommendation from the 9/11 Commission is now becoming a reality. Media coverage of the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012 focused largely on the extension of unemployment benefits and the temporary Social Security tax reduction.

A little publicized provision of the act, however, was the creation of the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet). Congress established FirstNet as an independent authority within the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA).

Building a Nationwide Network for Public Safety

FirstNet is charged with ensuring the development, operation, and maintenance of a nationwide interoperable broadband network for public safety. Prime spectrum for the network's deployment has been allocated, as well as \$7 billion in funding.

Congress created a board of directors with representatives of the President's Cabinet, along with telecommunications industry professionals, and public-safety

representatives. Congress also mandated the establishment of a Public Safety Advisory Committee (PSAC) to ensure that the development and operation of the network meets the needs of first responders. Thirty-five national professional associations, including ICMA, have appointed representatives to serve on the PSAC.

Improving Situational Awareness

Why do we need a nationwide broadband network for public safety? Public-safety personnel are continually seeking ways to improve situational awareness to more quickly and effectively respond to incidents. In order to raise situational awareness, first responders have an increased need to share such wireless broadband data as surveillance video of large-scale events, floor plans for fighting structure fires, or patient vital signs to emergency rooms from ambulances that are en route.

These applications need a stable platform with the capacity to handle large data transmissions. Current commercial networks often cannot support public-safety needs during major emergencies, as was experienced in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Public safety also currently cannot prevent non-priority users from accessing such networks when first responders need priority access to increased data transmissions during an incident. FirstNet is being designed to address these needs while keeping monthly subscription fees competitive with what users currently pay.

The Role of Managers

City and county managers are in an important position to help FirstNet build a nationwide network dedicated to public



safety. Managers are community leaders, recommending strategic public-safety initiatives, helping set funding priorities, and appointing senior public-safety officials.

As FirstNet becomes a reality, managers need to provide input into the design and operation of the network to ensure it meets local jurisdictions' needs at an affordable cost. Managers also need to ensure their jurisdictions are positioned to take advantage of FirstNet's full capabilities once the network is deployed.

So how should local government managers prepare for the deployment of this new network? First, they should gain an understanding of FirstNet's capabilities and how it will assist public-safety agencies to provide more cost-effective services.

Information is available on FirstNet's website at <http://www.firstnet.gov>, in such trade publications as *Urgent Communications* and *MissionCritical Communications*, and through state and local outreach events that will be coming to your areas. Managers should share this information and developments with elected officials, public-safety staff, and neighboring jurisdictions.

Second, get to know your state's single point of contact (SPOC) and FirstNet's staff. NTIA has awarded state and local implementation grant program (SLIGP) funds to 54 states and territories. These funds are being used for outreach to the public-safety community to assist in planning the network's development.

As part of these grants, each state has assigned a single point of contact to lead these efforts. You can identify your state's SPOC and contact information on FirstNet's website. FirstNet is also hiring regional outreach personnel well versed in public-safety communications issues. Your SPOC and FirstNet's staff will be able to keep your community apprised of the planning, development, and deployment processes within your state.

Third, begin identifying information sharing needs within your organization for broadband applications that can improve your public-safety services. These could include the need to view police dash cams at your dispatch center, accessing water

need to be considered in the network design, barriers to interoperability, affordability of participating in the network, and more.

You can provide feedback through the Public Safety Advisory Committee, your state's SPOC, FirstNet's staff, and any future request for information (RFI) and public notice processes issued by FirstNet. This network needs your input and support to ensure it meets the needs of public safety and gains the acceptance of local elected officials and managers who will authorize the necessary funding for monthly subscription costs and equipment upgrades.

This is an exciting time in public safety. Managers need to be on the

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system storage data during firefighting operations, or viewing the status of arriving public safety units in real time. This process will need to engage members of your management team, public-safety personnel, and information technology departments.

Upgrading communications systems to digital technology, improving interoperability, and expanding coverage take time. Improving basic communication systems now will help you more readily transition to FirstNet's services in the future.

Finally, give FirstNet feedback concerning the types of issues that are important to public safety in your area. These could be local control issues that

leading edge of this effort. The development of a nationwide public safety broadband network has the ability to revolutionize the delivery of public-safety services.

Our public-safety personnel need these advanced technologies to continue to provide the high-level service to which the public has grown accustomed as we manage our communities with ever-tightening budgets. **PM**



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