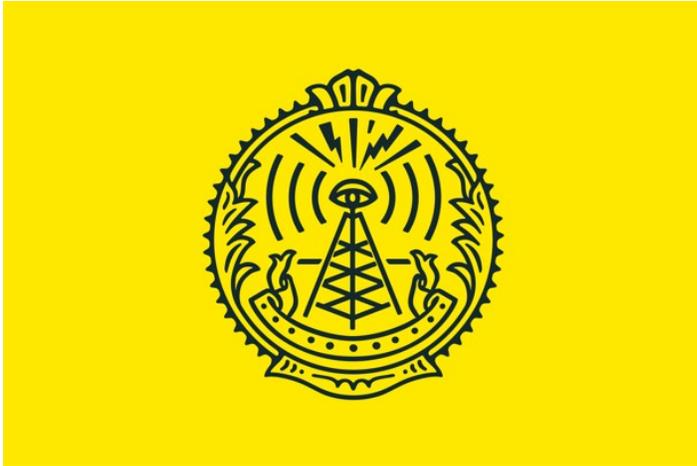


The Atlantic

The \$47 Billion Network That's Already Obsolete

FirstNet was envisioned as a way for police and firefighters to communicate with one another in the wake of 9/11. But four years later, it's still not up and running.



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THE PRIZE FOR the most wasteful post-9/11 initiative arguably should go to FirstNet—a whole new agency set up to provide a telecommunications system exclusively for firefighters, police, and other first responders. They would communicate on bandwidth worth billions of dollars in the commercial market but now reserved by the Federal Communications Commission for FirstNet.

FirstNet is in such disarray that 15 years after the problem it is supposed to solve was identified, it is years from completion—and it may never get completed at all. According to the GAO, estimates of its cost range from \$12 billion to \$47 billion, even as advances in digital technology seem to have eliminated the need to spend any of it.

FirstNet, which has received scant press attention, was established in 2012 and funded with an initial \$7 billion. A classic congressional compromise made it a quasi-independent unit of the Department of Commerce. That was supposed to give it the heft and authority of the federal government but the agility and culture of a private-sector start-up. In fact, the reverse dynamics seem to have taken over from the beginning.

It took FirstNet two years just to recruit a skeleton staff, only to be hit by an inspector general's report that found potential conflicts of interest and problems with the awarding of initial consulting contracts. It then took another two years to issue a request for proposal (RFP) asking contractors to bid on the work to build and operate the system.

The impetus for FirstNet grew out of an aspect of the September 11 narrative that is part tragedy and part urban myth.

One hundred twenty-one firefighters perished when the second tower at the World Trade Center collapsed. Supposedly, this was because police commanders, whose helicopters had the best view of how damaged the building was, were unable to communicate with fire commanders to warn them to get their people out. In the weeks after the attacks, the communications breakdown was simplified in the press—and even among first-responder experts newly recruited to Tom Ridge's White House staff whom I talked with at the time—as the inability of police and firefighters to communicate with one another on their radios. "It's crazy for the cops on the scene not to be able to talk to the firefighters" became the rallying cry around a new cause: interoperability.

However, problems with fire-department communications mostly had to do with the inability of fire commanders to communicate with their troops because repeater devices installed in the Trade Center to enable two-way radios to penetrate the building's thick walls and work from its high floors failed in the intense fire. Whether police and fire commanders were coordinating with one another sufficiently in a command center—an issue raised in later investigations—has nothing to do with whether police and firefighters in the building should have been able to talk on interoperable radios.

There are certainly some situations when interoperability is necessary, especially in major metropolitan areas, where first responders from multiple jurisdictions will swarm a dire emergency. But New York, Los Angeles, and other large jurisdictions have long since established protocols and bought technology that solve the problem. The combined forces are now able to plug into one another's systems without waiting for FirstNet's grand solution, which would allow all first responders to communicate over an emergency-response system established with specially reserved bandwidth across every inch of the 50 states.

Moreover, as cellphone technology advanced (including phones that use press-to-talk features, much like cops' walkie-talkies do), the interoperability argument began to lose its luster. Skeptics pointed out that everyone could now talk to everyone through their cellphones—and that various apps could easily establish user groups of first responders.

Can't my iPhone or iPad do what FirstNet is designed to do?

The justification for FirstNet shifted more to problems of bandwidth: The first responders needed their own network because in true calamities, such as in Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, consumer bandwidth is overwhelmed, causing calls to be blocked or dropped. That's true, but other technology now allows for designated users to get bandwidth priority in an emergency.

Yet another argument that emerged was that even if big metropolitan areas had largely solved these problems on their own, rural responders still needed help, both with interoperability and with setting up cell towers across vast regions where cell service does not now extend and where firefighters dealing with increasingly horrendous wildfires have perished for lack of communication. FirstNet is requiring

bidders to provide exactly that kind of ubiquitous service across the far reaches of rural America.

Yet in the FirstNet RFP itself there is mention of still another new technology—mobile cell towers—that telecommunications companies, perhaps with federal aid, could have on standby and deploy without building the entirely new, exclusive communications system envisioned by FirstNet. (Indeed, wouldn't we want the mobile towers to be used to provide cell service to civilians trapped in these fires too, rather than only to first responders?)

The FirstNet RFP, which finally emerged in January, seeks one company to operate the nationwide system. (Verizon, AT&T, and one or more firms that would gather dozens of regional partners into a consortium are the likely players.) The bidders have to offer to pay FirstNet at least \$5.6 billion spread over 25 years in return for the bandwidth that FirstNet would make available to them.

The winner (presumably, whichever company bids the most above \$5.6 billion, while also demonstrating it can do the job) can then sell the FirstNet network to police and fire departments, hospitals, and other first responders, one by one.

It is difficult to imagine jurisdictions like New York, which have long since solved interoperability, deciding to buy into a new, expensive FirstNet. And it is not hard to imagine a company winning the bid but then failing to get the first-responder customers it is counting on, or being unwilling to invest the funds necessary to meet the coverage and service standards it promises, because its winning bid makes it uneconomic to meet those standards.

Ryan Oremland, a spokesman for FirstNet, told me the program got bids, but he was prohibited by federal procurement rules from revealing how many. His agency expects to announce a winner by November 1, he added. But David Kahn, the chief executive of Silicon Valley-based Covia Labs, which sells interoperability technology, told me that FirstNet has "done absolutely nothing so far" and that if it achieves anything, "it'll be 10 to 20 years from now."

During a long conversation at the FirstNet headquarters, in Northern Virginia, TJ Kennedy, the project's president, seemed mesmerized by his mission, which he compared to the Manhattan Project. He kept coming back to how FirstNet—which he told me, unconvincingly, "may have some towers up by late 2017"—will allow emergency responders to do so much more than the push-to-talk function offered by old-time police walkie-talkies. Building layouts could be sent to police in hostage situations. Medical records could be texted to ambulance attendants.

But can't my iPhone or iPad do that?, I asked. Whereupon Kennedy brought the issue back to exclusive bandwidth—which, again, is solvable without FirstNet.

"Look," Kennedy said, "what if there's a fireman in New York who's touring West Point and is needed to help rescue someone off a mountain? Wouldn't you want him to be able to use his radio?"

Perhaps—assuming the off-duty fireman happened to have his FirstNet radio with him. But 15 years after the overdramatization of a problem that is now being solved with less dramatic solutions, being able to deal with that unlikely West Point

scenario—which has nothing to do with countering terror, anyway—seems more like a \$47 billion “nice to have” than anyone’s clear-eyed idea of a “must have.”

Certainly, FirstNet is not on Jeh Johnson’s priority list. Asked about FirstNet, the homeland-security secretary said he was “not familiar with what they’re supposed to be doing.”

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