

**Written Statement of
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Acting Board Chair of the First Responder Network Authority
Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation's
Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Media
“On the Front Lines of Connectivity: Examining FirstNet’s Role in Public Safety”
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Chairman Fischer, Ranking Member Lujan, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Michael Adkinson, Sheriff of Walton County, Florida and the Acting Board Chair of the First Responder Network Authority. I am honored to appear before you today to provide testimony regarding FirstNet’s role in public safety.

Introduction

Nearly twenty-five years ago, on September 11, 2001, our nation endured a devastating attack that exposed a critical vulnerability in our public safety infrastructure. America's first responders answered the call of duty that day, moving toward danger with unwavering courage and selflessness. Yet they were hampered by communication systems that were fragmented, incompatible, and overwhelmed. This failure to communicate cost lives.

In response, Congress made a deliberate and historic decision—guided by the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission and the urgent appeals of the public safety community—to establish a single, nationwide, interoperable broadband network dedicated exclusively to public safety. That decision became the foundation for legislation creating the Nationwide Public Safety Broadband Network (NPSBN), known as FirstNet.

Today, Congress’s vision is an operational reality for our nation’s first responders. FirstNet spans millions of square miles, delivering coverage across urban centers, rural communities, tribal lands, and U.S. territories. The network provides capabilities that public safety did not previously have, including 24/7 priority and preemption for first responders, nationwide interoperability, a dedicated core, on-demand mobile cellular assets, and scalable broadband capacity for mission-critical applications. As of September 30, 2025, over 30,000 public safety agencies and organizations have adopted FirstNet, including where I serve as sheriff in Walton County, Florida.

The Foundation for Success

Congress laid the foundation for FirstNet's success through the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act of 2012.¹ The Act created a model that sought to combine private sector innovation with government oversight to ensure performance and coverage standards essential to public safety.

First and foremost, Congress allocated 20 megahertz of nationwide spectrum, now known as Band 14, exclusively for public safety, ensuring first responders have prioritized access to communications when it matters most.

Second, Congress required the FirstNet Authority to be self-sustaining and to collect and reinvest fees generated under its nationwide public safety broadband network contract. The Government Accountability Office estimated that constructing and operating a nationwide public safety broadband network over the first 10 years could cost between \$12 billion to \$47 billion, depending on factors such as business model, use of existing infrastructure, reliability, and coverage.² Congress provided \$7 billion from commercial spectrum auction proceeds for the initial 4G LTE buildout. Additionally, under a public-private arrangement, FirstNet's contractor, AT&T, agreed to pay approximately \$18 billion over its 25-year contract term for the Band 14 spectrum lease. The FirstNet Authority determines how those funds are reinvested into the network, consistent with the law. This public-private model, initially capitalized with auction proceeds and sustained by contract fees, allows continuous improvements to public safety communications without requiring new taxpayer funding.³

Finally, Congress established a 15-member Board, which I am honored to serve on, composed of leaders from public safety, the private sector, and experts in finance and technology representing state, local, and federal perspectives. This diverse composition ensures decisions reflect both the operational realities of first responders, and the technical demands of a nationwide public safety

¹ Pub. L. No. 112-96, Title VI, 126 Stat. 156, see: <https://www.congress.gov/112/plaws/publ96/PLAW-112publ96.pdf>

² GAO Report (2015): Cost estimate range \$12–\$47 billion for construction and operation over 10 years ([GAO-15-407 Highlights PDF](#))

³ GAO Report (2022): FirstNet statutory requirements and reinvestment responsibilities ([GAO-22-104915](#))

broadband network. It is incumbent on the Board to provide strategic direction and rigorous oversight to guarantee (i) that the FirstNet Authority fulfills its statutory mandate and (ii) that the network evolves to meet the changing mission-critical needs of public safety. Through this governance structure, Congress sought to ensure accountability, transparency, and a direct voice for public safety in shaping the future of emergency communications.

FirstNet also demonstrated something critically important that did not exist before its creation: that there *is* a viable market for high-quality, mission-critical broadband services tailored to public safety. By aggregating demand, setting clear performance expectations, and proving that first responders would adopt and pay for a network built to their needs, FirstNet helped catalyze private-sector investment well beyond the confines of the original public safety broadband network contract.

At the same time, success should not breed complacency. We must not rest on our laurels. As technologies evolve and public safety's operational demands grow more complex, there are opportunities to improve how the network is managed, how investments are prioritized, and how performance is measured. Continued vigilance is necessary to ensure that FirstNet delivers a clear net benefit to public safety, that reinvestments are disciplined and aligned with mission needs, and that robust oversight mechanisms remain firmly in place. Congress wisely paired innovation with accountability in the original statute; honoring that balance means continually asking hard questions, refining governance, and ensuring transparency so that FirstNet remains worthy of the trust placed in it by first responders and the American public.

A Network Built by and for Public Safety

From the start, FirstNet was built with continuous input from the public safety community. The Act requires consultation with federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial stakeholders, and it established the Public Safety Advisory Committee (PSAC) to ensure the network reflects real-world operational needs. Through these channels, public safety informs coverage objectives, network hardening, priority and preemption, mission-critical services, deployable assets, rural and remote coverage, in-building solutions, cybersecurity, and resiliency needed to operate during disasters, major events, and daily incidents. This engagement ensures that FirstNet is not

merely a network with public safety features layered on top: it is a purpose-built public safety platform that adapts as threats evolve and technology advances.

The FirstNet Authority also works with public safety officials to plan for major events. Preparations are underway for the 2026 FIFA World Cup soccer tournament in multiple U.S. cities and for America 250 events to ensure mission execution and public safety.

FirstNet Future Investment

The FirstNet Authority has continued to make investments that expand coverage and evolve capabilities. In 2024, the Board approved a multi-year investment initiative to deliver full 5G capabilities via a standalone core, expand mission-critical services, bolster the deployable fleet, enhance in-building coverage, and add new sites to improve reach and reliability. FirstNet also convened coverage enhancement workshops across the country with state and local agencies to drive future investments where public safety needs them most.

Office of Inspector General Oversight

Of course, there remains room for improvement. As members of this Subcommittee well know, the Department of Commerce Office of Inspector General (OIG) has performed significant oversight of the FirstNet Authority since 2014. In 2024 alone, there were four audit reports and two management alerts addressing a range of issues, including contract modifications, coverage objective targets, and device connection targets. These reviews underscore the importance of rigorous oversight of the FirstNet contract.

As the Acting Board Chair, I take these recommendations seriously. My colleagues and I on the Board have directed FirstNet Authority management to resolve and close these recommendations expeditiously and to address the overarching theme identified by the OIG. Our duty to serve the public safety users of FirstNet requires us to provide strong oversight of the network and to not accept excuses, but rather focus on outcomes.

Reauthorization

Under the Act, FirstNet is scheduled to terminate in February 2027, which will create a risk to continued network operations and may result in a potential loss of service for public safety users. Reauthorization presents a prime opportunity to not only affirm Congress's commitment to public safety, but to improve FirstNet and set it up for success for future years. A currency of trust has been developed in the continuity of service provided by FirstNet. It would be hard to overstate the potential risk to public safety if that were to be eroded by a failure of reauthorization. We would risk the collapse of the nationwide interoperability effort the 9/11 Commission sought to address.

The success of FirstNet hinges on private sector innovation paired with rigorous oversight. However, over the past 14 years, there have been persistent challenges with contract oversight and accountability. As Acting Board Chair I have observed that the roles and responsibilities of NTIA, the Board, and the Authority are not well defined in the statute. Bluntly, when everyone is responsible no one is accountable. Reauthorization provides Congress with a clear opportunity to address these challenges directly by clarifying statutory roles, responsibilities, and the chain of command among NTIA, the Board, and the Authority.

Further, the law currently limits reinvestment to the network core or radio access network (RAN). While this made sense in 2012 during the launch of 4G LTE, as we move toward software driven and AI enabled 6G capabilities we risk locking FirstNet into technologies that were state-of-the-art 14 years ago. Expanding reinvestment authorities to include emerging technologies and services, such as cybersecurity enhancements, deployable assets, and advanced analytics will ensure the network continues to meet evolving public safety needs and affords our first responders access to the best possible technology.

There are a host of reforms Congress can consider to codify lessons learned over the past 14 years. This includes a simple but important reform near and dear to my heart—staggering the Board terms across three years to ensure more continuity and consistency among our membership. By way of example, in November of 2024 six new board members were empaneled

at the same time. This, as you can imagine, brings serious continuity challenges. I also am a strong believer in the voice that public safety can provide to the Board. While the law requires that three of the board members represent public safety, I encourage Congress to increase this number to five. In practice, this is how the Board is typically staffed and allows the Secretary of Commerce to nominate a broad array of public safety voices to the Board—from police (including local sheriffs like myself and major city police like my fellow board member Chief Norman), to fire, to EMS and 9-1-1. Finally, the administration will be submitting additional views and I will fully support them.

I look forward to discussing these ideas and more today. And, of course, I stand ready to work with Congress and the Members of this Subcommittee to improve the FirstNet program for our first responders across the nation. Thank you.