

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-569](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

FirstNet is charged with establishing a nationwide public-safety broadband network that is reliable, secure, and interoperable. To inform this work, FirstNet is consulting with a variety of stakeholders. In March 2017, FirstNet awarded a 25-year contract to AT&T to build, operate, and maintain the network. FirstNet's oversight of AT&T's performance is important given the scope of the network and the duration of the contract.

GAO was asked to review FirstNet's progress and efforts to ensure the network is reliable, secure, and interoperable. GAO (1) examined FirstNet's efforts to establish the network; (2) obtained stakeholder views on network reliability, security, and interoperability challenges FirstNet faces and its efforts to address them; and (3) assessed FirstNet's plans to oversee its network contractor. GAO reviewed FirstNet documentation, key contract oversight practices identified in federal regulations and other sources, tribal communication practices identified by federal agencies, and assessed FirstNet's efforts and plans against these practices. GAO also interviewed FirstNet officials and a nongeneralizable selection of public-safety, tribal, and other stakeholders selected to obtain a variety of viewpoints.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FirstNet fully explore tribal stakeholders' concerns and assess its long-term staffing needs. FirstNet agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-17-569](#). For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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PUBLIC-SAFETY BROADBAND NETWORK

FirstNet Has Made Progress Establishing the Network, but Should Address Stakeholder Concerns and Workforce Planning

What GAO Found

The First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) has conducted key efforts to establish the network, namely releasing the request for proposal (RFP) for the network and awarding the network contract to AT&T. As the contractor, AT&T will be responsible for the overall design, development, production, operation, and evolution of the network. Additionally, FirstNet consulted with state and local, federal, and tribal stakeholders. State officials GAO contacted were generally satisfied with FirstNet's efforts to engage them. However, tribal stakeholders GAO contacted expressed concern that FirstNet has not fully engaged in effective communication with tribes. FirstNet engaged tribes through a variety of mechanisms, such as through state points of contact and a working group, but tribes noted that individuals with first-hand knowledge of tribes' experiences are unable to represent tribal views directly among FirstNet's key decision makers. Although FirstNet is required to consult with tribes through state points of contact, a key principle of effective tribal communication is to seek full understanding of tribal concerns and reach consensus where possible. By fully exploring and proposing actions to address tribal stakeholders' concerns, FirstNet could help improve its relations with tribes and better meet stakeholders' needs.

According to stakeholders GAO contacted, FirstNet faces various challenges to ensure the network's reliability, security, and interoperability. For example, stakeholders raised concerns related to:

- providing coverage to rural areas, in buildings, or underground;
- ensuring the network's overall resiliency and cybersecurity; and
- managing frameworks for user identity, credentialing of users, access management, and prioritization of users on the network.

FirstNet has taken action to address these challenges, such as by opening a test lab to test public safety devices and applications before deploying them on the network. The majority of stakeholders GAO contacted were satisfied with FirstNet's efforts, but many noted that much uncertainty remains about how the network will be implemented.

FirstNet established offices to oversee its network contractor, developed policies and procedures to guide contract administration—including management and oversight—and is receiving assistance from another federal agency with contract administration experience, although FirstNet plans to assume full responsibility in the future. For example, FirstNet established the Network Program Office to oversee the contractor's performance and facilitate quality assurance of contract deliverables, among other things. Although this office will perform essential contract-administration functions, FirstNet had not conducted long-term projections of staffing needs for the office as of April 2017. As a result, FirstNet lacks reasonable assurance that it will have sufficient resources to handle increases in its responsibilities over time. Planning for and assigning adequate resources, including people, and assessing resource needs is a key practice for planning and executing effective contract oversight. By performing a long-term staffing assessment for the Network Program Office, FirstNet would be in a better position to fully understand its staffing needs and respond to staffing changes and risks as it assumes full responsibility of contract administration in the future.