

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-346](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Public-safety officials such as police officers and firefighters rely on communications systems to do their jobs. The Department of Commerce's FirstNet must establish a nationwide public-safety broadband network for use by these officials. In March 2017, FirstNet awarded a 25-year, multibillion-dollar contract to AT&T to deploy, operate, and maintain the network. AT&T must meet milestones specified in the contract, such as for providing network coverage and for the network's adoption. FirstNet's oversight of AT&T's progress and performance is critical given the contract's scope and duration.

GAO was asked to review FirstNet's progress and oversight. GAO examined the extent to which (1) AT&T is meeting milestones for the network's coverage and adoption and (2) FirstNet is overseeing AT&T in accordance with key practices. GAO analyzed FirstNet and AT&T documentation; assessed FirstNet's oversight efforts against key contract-oversight practices identified in federal regulations and other government, academic, and industry guidance; and assessed the program's master schedule against GAO best practices. GAO interviewed FirstNet officials, and selected state, local, and tribal officials and first responders representing a variety of viewpoints. Although not generalizable, they provided useful perspectives.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that FirstNet ensure the schedule aligns with GAO best practices, share additional oversight and other information with appropriate stakeholders, and utilize end-user satisfaction information to gauge performance. FirstNet agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-20-346](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or [vonaha@gao.gov](mailto:vonaha@gao.gov).

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## PUBLIC-SAFETY BROADBAND NETWORK

### Network Deployment Is Progressing, but FirstNet Could Strengthen Its Oversight

## What GAO Found

AT&T is meeting—or on track to meet—all nationwide, contractual network coverage and usage (adoption) milestones for the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) public-safety broadband network. AT&T has met the first nationwide coverage milestone (20 percent of the final expected coverage by March 2019), but coverage varies across states. Similarly, AT&T is on track to meet the first nationwide adoption milestone (which is to have a certain number of devices connected to the network by March 2020). AT&T has exceeded adoption targets in most states but lags in others. According to FirstNet officials, variances by state are allowable, as the key milestones are nationwide.

FirstNet uses various mechanisms to oversee AT&T; many of which align with key contract-oversight practices. For example, FirstNet uses a quality assurance surveillance plan to evaluate AT&T's performance. However, GAO found that FirstNet lacked (1) a reliable master schedule to review, (2) communication with relevant stakeholders regarding contract oversight, and (3) meaningful information on end-users' satisfaction to gauge performance quality.

- **Schedule.** AT&T is required to provide a current master schedule to FirstNet monthly, but the schedule only partially or minimally meets the characteristics of a reliable schedule per GAO best practices. For example, the schedule only partially captures all activities or the duration or sequence of activities. Key practices call for tracking a contractor's progress toward the expected schedule. Having a more detailed schedule to review could improve FirstNet's insight into AT&T's deployment and strengthen FirstNet's use of the schedule as a management tool.
- **Stakeholder communication.** Numerous public-safety officials GAO interviewed were dissatisfied with the level or quality of information received from FirstNet, noting that FirstNet had communicated little to no information on AT&T's progress or FirstNet's oversight. FirstNet officials said there is no contractual requirement to share such information, but key practices call for communicating appropriate information to relevant stakeholders and reporting on monitoring results. The lack of information has left stakeholders speculating about what, if any, oversight FirstNet conducts; sharing more information about the oversight FirstNet conducts could improve public-safety sentiment for and support of the program.
- **End-users' satisfaction.** FirstNet collects some information that could relate to end-users' satisfaction, but this information provides limited insight into users' experiences. For example, AT&T surveys some users to ask whether they would recommend FirstNet services, but a user might do so due to limited alternatives, not satisfaction. Although end-users' satisfaction is not a performance quality measure in the contract, key practices call for using end-user satisfaction information as a metric to gauge performance quality. By not using this information to inform FirstNet's oversight or related activities, FirstNet could be missing an opportunity to increase assurance of the program's long-term success.

This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in December 2019. Information that FirstNet deemed proprietary has been omitted.