

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-380T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Public safety officials rely on thousands of separate radio systems to communicate during emergencies, which often lack interoperability, or the ability to communicate across agencies and jurisdictions. The 2012 act created FirstNet to establish a nationwide, interoperable, wireless broadband network for public safety use. In doing so, the act established numerous responsibilities for FirstNet, provided \$7 billion from spectrum auctions proceeds for the network's construction, and required FirstNet to be self-funding beyond this initial allocation. As part of the effort, FirstNet is working with five "early builder projects" that have permission to build local and regional interoperable public-safety broadband networks.

This statement is based on preliminary information from GAO's ongoing review of FirstNet. This statement addresses (1) FirstNet's progress carrying out its responsibilities and establishing internal controls, (2) how much the network is estimated to cost and how FirstNet plans to become self-funding, and (3) what lessons can be learned from the early builder projects. GAO reviewed relevant FirstNet documentation and public-safety network cost estimates recommended by agency officials and experts; surveyed the state-designated FirstNet contact in 50 states, 5 territories, and the District of Columbia; and interviewed FirstNet officials and public safety and wireless industry stakeholders selected for their telecommunications and public safety experience, among other things.

View [GAO-15-380T](#). For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteim@gao.gov.

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PUBLIC SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS

Preliminary Information on FirstNet's Efforts to Establish a Nationwide Broadband Network

What GAO Found

GAO's ongoing work has found that the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet) has made progress carrying out the responsibilities established in the 2012 Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act (the 2012 act) but lacks certain elements of effective internal controls. FirstNet has made progress establishing an organizational structure, planning the nationwide public-safety broadband network, and consulting with stakeholders. Nevertheless, stakeholders GAO contacted cited upcoming issues, such as deciding the level of network coverage, which will be difficult for FirstNet to address as it continues to carry out its responsibilities. With respect to internal controls, FirstNet has begun establishing policies and practices consistent with federal standards, but it has not fully assessed its risks or established Standards of Conduct. Given that FirstNet faces a multitude of risks to achieve its complex objectives, fully assessing risks would help FirstNet respond to risks in a proactive way. Developing standards of conduct would help FirstNet address conduct and performance issues in a timely manner.

A nationwide public-safety broadband network is estimated to cost billions of dollars, and FirstNet faces difficult decisions determining how to fund the network's construction and ongoing operations. Various entities have estimated the cost to construct and operate such a network from \$12 to \$47 billion over the first 10 years. The actual cost of FirstNet's network will be influenced by FirstNet's (1) business model, especially the extent of commercial partnerships; (2) use of existing infrastructure; (3) efforts to ensure network reliability; and (4) network coverage. For example, the cost of the network will likely increase if FirstNet does not utilize commercial partnerships and at least some existing infrastructure. The 2012 act provides FirstNet \$7 billion to establish the network. To become self-funding, FirstNet is authorized to generate revenue through user fees and commercial partnerships, the latter of which can involve secondary use of the network for non-public safety services. However, GAO's ongoing work suggests that FirstNet faces difficult decisions in determining how to best utilize these revenue sources. For instance, widespread network coverage can attract more users, and thus user fee revenue, but is expensive to construct and maintain, especially in rural areas.

FirstNet has taken steps to collect and evaluate information and lessons from the five "early builder projects" that are developing local and regional public-safety networks, but could do more to ensure that it properly evaluates and incorporates these lessons. For example, FirstNet has asked the projects to report on the experiences of their networks' users and has assigned contractors to collect and log lessons. However, preliminary results indicate that FirstNet does not have a plan that clearly articulates how it will evaluate those experiences and lessons. GAO has previously found that a well-developed evaluation plan for projects like these can help ensure that agencies obtain the information necessary to make effective program and policy decisions. Given that the early builder projects are doing on a local and regional level what FirstNet must eventually do nationally, an evaluation plan can play a key role in FirstNet's strategic planning and program management, providing feedback on both program design and execution and ensuring FirstNet has not missed opportunities to incorporate lessons the projects have identified.